
A Step into The Past

Book 12

Huang Yi

A Step into the Past Book 12

Author : Huang Yi

All Rights Reserved.

Disclaimer

Under no circumstances would you be allowed to take this work for commercial activities or for personal gain.

All materials copyrights reserved by their respective authors and the associated publishers. Please respect their rights. Works will be deleted upon request by copyrights holder.

Support author by buying the book on your respective country upon release.

Translation by kohchun (<http://www.spcnet.tv>)

PDF Creator by Chans

PDF Created on 13 March 2015

Chapter 01

Internal and External Problems

Xiang Shaolong was terrified. If a composed and experienced man like Master Tu says we are in trouble, then we are really in big trouble. He quickly asked for an explanation.

Master Tu started: “Your brother-in-law came looking for Lu Buwei last night and they chatted for almost four hours. After their discussion, Lu Buwei ordered Lu Xiong and myself to spy on your activities. In addition, he threw a tantrum and cursed you, scolding that you do not know what is good for you and even helped Xu Xian become the Left Premier. I am certain that your brother-in-law betrayed you.”

Xiang Shaolong was mortified. In a state of panic, he summoned Teng Yi and his father-in-law and updated them on this development.

Wu Yingyuan slammed the table heavily and cursed: “How dare he betray his own family! I will sentence him to death according to the house rules.”

Teng Yi’s face was filled with dread as well. If Lu Buwei actively plots against them, they will be in deep trouble.

Xiang Shaolong deduced: “We are not sure what Tingwei has told Lu Buwei. If Lu Buwei knows everything, he will evade me or send an assassin after me immediately. He will not allow me to continue working for him.”

In the short span of time, Wu Yingyuan seemed to have aged a few years. He sighed: “Luckily, I did not say much to that b@sterd. I only mentioned that Lu Buwei is an accommodating man on the surface but is very jealous of people who are more capable than him. Therefore, he is not very dependable. With the King and Queen favouring Shaolong, he will be extremely envious. We must take early precautions and prepare an exit strategy for ourselves. It is really fortunate that I did not tell them the other details.”

Teng Yi commented in a deep voice: “From my point of view, Master Tingwei is not that brave. He must have had the backing of some of the other Wu Family members to act like this. We must not act rashly but conduct some investigations first.”

Master Tu nodded: “Brother Teng is right. If you do something harsh to Master Tingwei now, you will only raise Lu Buwei’s suspicions and he will know that you have a spy in his residence.”

Wu Yingyuan sighed and his eyes are shimmering with tears. After all, Wu Tingwei is his own flesh and blood. How can he not be heart-broken?

Master Tu added: “Lu Buwei is a genius. Seeing that Shaolong retreated to the farms after his mission and even prepared an exit strategy, he will guess that you have discovered his plot. If this matter is leaked out, it is highly detrimental to him. He will never let you off.”

Wu Yingyuan wiped away his tears and coldly snorted: “Everyone in Qin has a good opinion of Shaolong and our farms are performing well. What can he do to us?”

Master Tu explained: “Recently, Lu Buwei recruited a famous swordsman. Like Lian Jin whom Shaolong killed, he is from Wei and is Lian Jin’s martial brother. Named Guan Zhongxie, his frame is even bigger than Shaolong and Brother Teng. I believe that he is stronger than Xiao Weimou. He possesses top sword skills, excellent riding skills and can fight against a hundred men. He is also gifted with sharp intelligence and has become Lu Buwei’s confidante. Now, he is responsible for training Lu Buwei’s family warriors, making Lu Buwei even more powerful. You must not let your guard down against him.”

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong could feel their goose pimples rising. If this man is stronger than Xiao Weimou, they will not be his match.

They managed to kill Xiao Weimou that fateful day because he was injured by their arrow. Otherwise, it will be hard to determine who will be the eventual winner.

Wu Yingyuan inquired: “Has Master Tu exchanged blows with him before?”

Master Tu bitterly smiled: “We exchanged a few stances. Although there was no clear victor, I know he is way better than me. Otherwise, I will not bring him up.”

Everyone was blown away.

Master Tu is the best swordsman in Lu Buwei’s residence. If he says he is way behind Guan Zhongxie, then Guan Zhongxie is indeed formidable.

Teng Yi predicted; “With this man helping Lu Buwei, they may arrange a

dinner with a friendly match for entertainment and force Shaolong to fight him. On this pretext, they can kill Shaolong and blame it on carelessness. This is not a private duel and it is common for Qin people to have friendly matches during dinner. By that time, Shaolong is dead and King Zhuangxiang cannot hold it against Lu Buwei.”

Wu Yingyuan does not know much about Xiao Weimou. Thus, he is full of confidence in Xiang Shaolong. He coldly laughed: “Is Shaolong so easy to kill? But you must take extra care when you leave the farm.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself – Before he openly clash with Lu Buwei, there are many things he cannot avoid. He sighed: “Lu Buwei has been recruiting men of talent everywhere. Are there any others worth mentioning?”

Master Tu continued: “In terms of knowledge, there is a guy named Mo Ao. This man is awfully smart and is like a walking encyclopaedia. However, he has an evil heart and I am sure it was him who thought of the scheme to ambush you at the red pine forest. He is well-versed in poisons and he was suspected to have poisoned the late king.”

Teng Yi frowned: “Even you have no idea?”

Master Tu sighed: “Mo Ao married Lu Buwei’s sister and is considered his relative. Such an important issue is only known to his own clansmen. Even I, who have been with him for almost two decades, am kept in the dark. Now, they are trying to restrict my followers. Ai!” Finishing, he has a hurt expression on his face.

Wu Yingyuan could not hold back, asking: “Why doesn’t Master Tu follow Mister Xiao’s example and leave his residence?”

Master Tu’s face darkened and he gritted his teeth: “Such a heartless man, I want to see what kind of retribution he will receive. Fortunately, I am still of value to him. As long as he does not know that I have seen through him, he will not make trouble for me. On the surface, he is still acting like someone who values brotherhood and relationships.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with him: “In terms of knowledge, there is Mo Ao. In terms of martial arts, who is a potential threat?”

Master Tu divulged: “There are three men. Although they are not as skilled as Guan Zhongxie, they are first rate fighters as well. They are Lu Chan, Zhou Zihen and Du (poison).”

Xiang Shaolong was shaken: “Du?”

The other three men stared at him, astounded.

Master Tu was curious: “Do you know him? He may be from Zhao but has left Zhao three years ago. In the end, he went to Han and seduce Han Chuang’s wife. Han Chuang sent assassins after him and he was forced to come to Xianyang City. I don’t think Shaolong has met him before.”

Xiang Shaolong was tongue tied. In the Qin Shi Huang movie, Du was an important spy. He conspired with Zhu Ji and left Lu Buwei’s control. He cause chaos to the Qin court and even secretly rebelled. But how can he tell them

about all these?

He lied: “Nothing. I just felt that his name sounds funny!”

The three men continue to eye him suspiciously.

Xiang Shaolong waved his hand and added: “Honestly, I don’t know why but when I heard this name, I do not feel comfortable. Hei! What kind of person is he?”

With his excuse, everyone was relieved and their suspicions disappeared.

Originally, Teng Yi is fearless. With a pretty wife and a beautiful son, his thinking is no longer the same as before.

Master Tu thought hard and replied: “Du is very good with psychological attacks. His flattery skill is second to none and is highly favoured by Lu Buwei. With dashing good looks, he attracts women like honey attracts ants. In Xianyang City, he is the most popular guest in the brothels.”

Pausing, he added: “He is blessed by the heaven to have the best Sexual stamina and his record is ten women in one sitting. Lu Buwei loves to use him to seduce the wives and maids of his enemies, gathering important intelligence. Hng! Nonetheless, he is another heartless cad and has destroyed countless marriages. If not for Lu Buwei shielding him, he will be murdered long ago.”

The four men quietened down.

Among Lu Buwei's recruits, there are many 'unorthodox' people. Going against him will not be easy.

Wu Yingyuan sighed again: "Isn't Master Tu afraid that Lu Buwei will suspect you for visiting us like this?"

Master Tu explained: "I came here on his orders to invite Shaolong to attend a banquet at his residence three days later. I have no idea why Shaolong is invited and Master Wu is left out. I am sure he is up to no good."

Xiang Shaolong recalled Lu Buwei's marriage proposal and sighed: "I will do my best to counter him. We shall see what the future will bring. After all, some things just cannot be avoided."

Wu Yingyuan commented: "External threats are frightening but internal strife is worse. If I do not harden my heart and cleanse my household, I will regret it when we suffer in the future."

Master Tu advised: "You must not act rashly or even let Master Tingwei know that he has been found out. In fact, you can use him to create a false impression in front of Lu Buwei."

Turning to Xiang Shaolong, he swore: "Lu Buwei is the most scheming man I have ever seen. In Xianyang City, you are the only one who can match up to him. He has Master Tingwei spying for him; you have me spying for you. Let's see who will have the last laugh."

Xiang Shaolong regained his composure and smiled: "I will not make big

promises but as long as I am alive, I will seek justice for our dead brothers and Princess Qian.”

Back at his backyard, his three wives and the Tian sisters are playing with his son happily.

Despite his terrible mood, he picked up his son Bao’er, whom Ji Yanran named, and cuddled him. Witnessing the cheerfulness of the ladies and thinking about the danger that is upon them, he is experiencing mixed feelings.

The beautiful and clever Ji Yanran could tell that something is bothering him. Pulling him aside, she asked for the reason.

Xiang Shaolong updated her about Wu Tingwei’s betrayal and warned: “We must remind Tingfang not to tell this br@t anything about our last mission.”

After thinking it over, Ji Yanran suggested: “I have a better plan. We will get Tingfang to create a false impression that Tingwei will believe with a doubt. When the word is passed to Lu Buwei, we may be able to trick him!”

Xiang Shaolong was hard-pressed and questioned: “What reason can we use for hiding in the farms and avoiding Lu Buwei?”

Ji Yanran detailed: “We can make use of Lu Xiong. We can say we guessed Lu Xiong and Lord Yangquan are communicating secretly. Therefore, we suspect Lu Buwei may be involved. This way, Lu Buwei’s greatest secret is still preserved. His greatest fear is that we know that it was not Lord Yangquan

who ambushed us.”

Xiang Shaolong was overjoyed and kissed her, praising: “Great idea! With you this female Zhuge providing me with good strategies, what is there to fear?”

Ji Yanran was stunned: “What is female Zhuge?”

Xiang Shaolong knew that he has a slip of the tongue. Zhuge Liang belongs to the era of the Three Kingdoms and will be born a few hundred years later. Of course Talented Lady Ji does not know who he is.

Coincidentally, Zhao Zhi came over and exclaimed: “Sister Rou is making me worried and did not even write us a single letter. Sister Lan is annoyed that she did not come to see her.”

Xiang Shaolong was reminded about Shan Rou and thought of Zhao Ya at the same time. His mood just got better after Ji Yanran’s suggestion but now it got worse again.

After coaxing Zhao Zhi, Xiang Shaolong faced Ji Yanran and informed: “We are going back to Xianyang City tomorrow. Didn’t Qin Qing invite you to stay over at her place? Let’s travel together.”

Ji Yanran giggled in agreement. She went to get Wu Tingfang into their rooms and proceeded to tell her about their plan.

Xiang Shaolong could not bear to see Wu Tingfang upset over his own brother’s betrayal. He went to find Teng Yi to practice their Mohist swordplay.

To face the incoming danger, he must be in top form.

In these tumultuous times, you must possess both brains and brawn.

The next ten years will be the most difficult time of their lives.

As they were leaving for Xianyang City, they discovered that Wu Yingyuan has fallen ill.

Xiang Shaolong's father-in-law has always been in the pink of health and is rarely sick. This sudden illness must have been created by his anger at his son's betrayal.

Xiang Shaolong instructed Wu Tingfang to take good care of him and left. Still worried about him, he rode towards Xianyang City with Ji Yanran, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Eighteen Guardians.

Wu Zhou and his elite army have left the farm for many months. Although there is no word from him, Xiang Shaolong is assured that they will be safe with Wang Jian's protection.

At dawn, they entered the city. Suppressing the desire to check out Qin Qing's home, he got a delighted Jing Jun to escort Ji Yanran to Qin Qing's residence near the palace. He returned to the Wu residence with Teng Yi.

The moment they stepped into the house, they saw Wu Tingwei quarrelling with Tao Fang. Wu Tingwei saw them coming and coldly greeted them. He then left in a huff.

Tao Fang shook his head sighing: “He is beyond control!”

After they got seated, Tao Fang explained: “Two days ago, he wanted five taels of gold from me. Today, he wanted another five taels. I don’t mind giving it to him but when Master Wu questions me about it, how am I supposed to reply him? Hng! I heard he is bewitched with the courtesan Dan Meimei from Drunken Wind brothel. No wonder he is spending uncontrollably. A nitwit will always be a nitwit. He gives his gold to the woman and the woman will give the gold to her gigo1o.”

Xiang Shaolong cannot imagine that this is already in practice during these ancient times. He took the opportunity to ask: “Which gigo1o has this ability to make the courtesan pay for his services?”

Tao Fang replied with disdain: “That handsome boy from Premier Lu Residence. He bragged that he can use his organ and block the wheel of a donkey cart. The cart will not be able to move at all despite the donkey pulling. Can you believe that?”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged glances, knowing that there is more to it than meets the eye.

Xiang Shaolong inquired in a deep voice: “Is it Du (poison)?”

Tao Fang was astounded: “You heard about him too?”

Tao Fang did not know about Wu Tingwei’s betrayal and Xiang Shaolong took this chance to tell him about it.

Tao Fang's face was full of disappointment, sighing: "I should have seen this coming. Since Shaolong came into our family, you have outshone this arrogant bastard. He will not submit to you. Moreover, Xianyang City is full of nightlife and entertainment. For him to leave here and relocate to the wilderness is as good as killing him."

Teng Yi cautioned: "It seems like Lu Buwei is controlling him via Du and Dan Meimei. We must be on high alert. If Lu Buwei manages to eliminate Master Wu, the family business and warriors will fall into the hands of this nitwit. With the family elders supporting him, we can no longer stay in Wu Family!"

Tao Fang's face was deathly white, quavering: "Young Master will not be so daring!"

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: "Bewitched by women and psychological coercion, there is nothing he will not do. There is actually no difference between betraying the family to Lu Buwei and killing his own father."

Teng Yi recalled: "Do you remember Mo Ao whom Master Tu mentioned? He is a poisons expert and can kill people without a trace. We must guard against him."

Tao Fang's expression has become ugly beyond measure. He stood up and affirmed: "Let me make a trip back to the farm and have a good talk with Master Wu."

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "Father-in-law is sick and bedridden. It is a good time to visit him."

Tao Fang and Wu Yingyuan share a close relationship. Upon hearing this, he left quickly.

The moment he left, a palace attendant came, summoning Xiang Shaolong to see King Zhuangxiang.

Before he can even finish his tea, Xiang Shaolong left with the attendant.

At the palace, the leader of the palace guards An Gu welcomed: "The King was about to send someone to the farms. It was good that you are in the City and we did not have to make the trip."

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "What is it that he summoned me so urgently?"

An Gu whispered into his ear: "Wei has retreated!"

Xiang Shaolong was reminded about his trick to sow discord and thought about Zhao Ya's safety now that Prince Xinling is in trouble.

An Gu added: "After Grand Tutor has seen the King, please follow me to the Crown Prince palace. Study attendant Li wishes to have a good chat with you."

For a while, Xiang Shaolong does not remember having such an acquaintance. Then he realised that it was Li Si and cheered: "I wish to see him too! Marshall An must be very familiar with him by now."

As An Gu led him into the corridor that goes deeper into the inner palace, he

smiled: “He is very knowledgeable and has earned our respect. Even King Zhuangxiang, Empress Ji and Prince Zheng are full of praise for his farsightedness.”

Xiang Shaolong was highly amused. In fact, he is the most ‘far-sighted’ man during these ancient times. The people that he recommends can never go wrong. If Li Si cannot even impress these people, how can he be Qin’s second-in-command in the future?

This man is well-versed in legalism which is the same frequency as Shang Yang’s reforms. It suits the needs of Qin well.

A study attendant may be a lowly post but it is a post that gives him plenty of exposure to the Crown Prince. With genuine abilities and his support of Xiao Pan, his career will naturally soar in the future.

In the midst of his thoughts, he unknowingly came in front of a pair of majestic doors.

Entering the room, King Zhuangxiang’s joyous words were heard: “Come here Shaolong! You have scored a huge merit for Qin. I must reward you handsomely.”

Xiang Shaolong glanced at him and the officials assembled in front of him. The two Premiers Lu Buwei and Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Jia Gongcheng, Cai Ze, Ying Lou, Ying Ao and Wang Ling are all present. Compared to the previous session, only General Du Bi, who disliked him, is absent.

He hurriedly knelt down and declared: "It is my duty to do my best for Qin. Your Majesty need not give me any reward."

King Zhuangxiang laughed: "You may rise! Without losing lives, we managed to resolve the situation. This kind of strategy is the best!"

Getting back on his feet, he peeped at Lu Buwei. A murderous look flashed across his eyes before he faked a smile: "Shaolong is a man who is humble about his achievements. He has yet to accumulate any military contributions. Your Majesty can let him lead an army into battle in near future. When he comes back victorious, we can reward him accordingly. Wouldn't that be better?"

Xiang Shaolong had just sat down and was thinking hard about the murderous look. He must be extra careful about the banquet tomorrow night. Otherwise, he may be killed when invited to duel at the friendly match.

From King Zhuangxiang's words, it proves that he does not like wars and deaths. This is the complete reverse of Lu Buwei's wild ambitions.

Lu Gong laughed heartily: "Left Premier's thinking is too rigid. Without losing a soldier, the army of Wei has retreated and the other four armies are in a state of disarray. Isn't this a military contribution?"

King Zhuangxiang was thrilled: "My sentiments exactly. What suggestions do the rest of you have?"

Everyone pretended to be deaf and dumb. They already knew that King

Zhuangxiang has a favourable impression of Xiang Shaolong and will not bother objecting. After discussion, Xiang Shaolong was appointed as an Imperial Marshal serving to protect King Zhuangxiang. This is the same rank as An Gu. If King Zhuangxiang ever goes to war personally, he and An Gu will be his two bodyguards. However, it is only a title without any military authority.

Everyone offered their congratulations.

Under the present circumstances, there is no way Xiang Shaolong can reject him. At the same time, he realised that King Zhuangxiang's promotion has pushed him closer to a open conflict with Lu Buwei.

In the past when he was dealing with the formidable Zhao Mu, he did not have any reservations. However, it was stated in history that after King Zhuangxiang passed away, there will be ten solid years that Lu Buwei will dominate Qin politics and no one is his match. Also wondering if he will die under his treacherous hands, he was filled with dread and confusion.

His incomplete knowledge about his fate and the future is becoming a mental burden.

After further discussions, King Zhuangxiang invited Xiang Shaolong to have dinner with him and left happily. He returned to his bedroom for his afternoon nap.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling uneasy. King Zhuangxiang did not invite Lu Buwei along, meaning that it was solely Xiang Shaolong's achievement.

Helplessly, he exchanged a few hypocritical words with Lu Buwei and left to look for Li Si.

Li Si has moved to a guest room beside the Crown Prince palace. The minute he saw Xiang Shaolong, he smiled sincerely and thanked An Gu profusely. He then led Xiang Shaolong into his small hall.

Xiang Shaolong could feel that he is no longer as downcast as before and was like a completely new and energised man. Happy for him, he exclaimed: “Brother Li must be having a good time here.”

Li Si guffawed: “All thanks to Brother Xiang’s recommendation. Compared to Premier’s residence, it is as different as heaven and hell. If you want me to go back there, I will rather die.”

From his words, Xiang Shaolong could guess that he has been discriminated against and thus, lived an unhappy existence in Premier Residence.

A pretty maid came up to them and served tea before retiring to the inner hall.

Xiang Shaolong noticed that she was a lively and alluring young lady and could not resist taking a few more glances.

Li Si mentioned in a low voice: “This is a welcome gift from Prince Zheng. Isn’t she beautiful?”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling emotional. Xiao Pan used to violate ladies and

was punished by his mother Zhao Ni. Now, he is giving them away.

But this kid is still quite obedient and treated Li Si well as he had requested. He even knew how to secure his loyalty by presenting him with a beauty. What a boy!

Xiang Shaolong had to know and asked: “What does Brother Li think of Prince Zheng?”

Li Si’s expression is full of respect, describing: “The Crown Prince is full of ambitions, highly observant and possesses the ability to learn very quickly. In the future, he will be the one who will unite the world. I am lucky to serve a capable King and it is all thanks to Brother Xiang.”

It is Xiang Shaolong’s turn to respect Li Si.

He is confident that Xiao Pan will be Qin Shi Huang as it says so in history. But Li Si is able to predict the same thing based on his intelligence. Therefore, Li Si had much greater foresight.

Li Si’s eyes continued to shine with respect at Xiang Shaolong, stated: “When I was studying with Prince Zheng the day before, the King and Queen came to visit him. They told me about Brother Xiang’s suggestion to unite the world. Externally, we can connect the walls of each state against the northern barbarians. Internally, we must have a common currency, set up provinces, open roads, build bridges, standardised the writing system and weights and measurement. Such a brilliant and far-sighted vision! I respect you from the bottom of my heart.”

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted. He could not imagine the words he careless sprout would become teaching material for Xiao Pan. When Xiao Pan executes these ideas, wouldn't it be history reflecting history? What a mess!

After chatting further, Li Si asked Xiang Shaolong about Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong told him the truth and Li Si assured: "Brother Xiang need not worry. From what I see, King Zhuangxiang is displeased with Lu Buwei's fighting and causing the combined armies to blockade the Pass. The traitor's honeymoon period is ending soon."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. Even with your intelligence, you cannot guess that King Zhuangxiang is dying soon. He sincerely advised: "Heaven's plans are unfathomable. No matter what happens in the future, Brother Li only needs to focus on assisting the Crown Prince. Do not bother yourself with other issues."

Discontented, Li Si protested: "Who does Brother Xiang think I am? We are true friends and should share wealth and woe. In the future, do not speak like this."

Xiang Shaolong was smiling bitterly when Xiao Pan summoned him.

Both men felt that their meeting was too brief but they cannot ignore the order of the Crown Prince.

Xiang Shaolong may have plenty of enemies but he has made some friends as well.

Chapter 02

The Death Of Zhuangxiang

Xiao Pan was standing at the window with his arms folded. Staring at the sun setting at the garden below, he does look imposing. After the attendant came in with Xiang Shaolong and withdrew, he plainly invited: "Grand Tutor, please come to my side!"

Xiang Shaolong felt that he is starting to resemble a proper Crown Prince. Moving to his side, he joined him in watching the sunset.

Xiao Pan turned and watched him briefly before he resumed his gaze, sighing softly.

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "Is something bothering Crown Prince?"

Xiao Pan revealed a bitter expression and sighed: "If I am bothered, no one should know better than Grand Tutor!"

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback.

This is the first time Xiao Pan is speaking to him in such an official manner. Xiang Shaolong can feel the distance widening between both of them. Emotional, he sighed as well.

After an unnatural minute of silence, Xiao Pan revealed: "Yesterday, Premier

Lu told me something strange. He told me that in this world, there are only three persons who are really sincere to me. They are Father, Mother and himself. Among the three persons, only he can help me unite the whole world. He advised me not to trust anyone else. Anyone else besides the three of them are just stepping stones in helping me dominate the world. Ai! He really treats me like his own son and thought that I know it as well.”

Turning around, he stared straight at Xiang Shaolong and asked in a low voice: “Master! Why did he say something like that? Is he against you? I don’t even know when I’ll be King but he seems to be treating me like the King already. Isn’t it strange?”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling uncomfortable under his stare.

In the past, he will scold him for addressing himself as Master. But under his pressing gaze, he was lost for words. At the same time, from Lu Buwei’s words, he can deduce that Lu Buwei is not on good terms with him, highlighting his sensitivity and intelligence.

Xiao Pan realised his slip and recomposed himself, questioning: “From Grand Tutor’s expression, something unhappy must have happened between him and Premier Lu.”

His mood darkening slightly, he added: “Does Grand Tutor still wishes to hide something from me?”

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly alarmed at another problem that Xiao Pan has brought up.

Although he knew that Xiao Pan will soon be King after King Zhuangxiang's death as stated in history but how would Lu Buwei know this as well? Thinking deeper, his heart pumped madly.

Xiao Pan was surprised and inquired: "Why is Grand Tutor's expression so grave looking?"

Xiang Shaolong was thinking furiously. Historians mentioned that King Zhuangxiang died of illness three years after ascending the throne. But this is not true.

King Zhuangxiang is poisoned to death by Lu Buwei. Otherwise, he will not say these strange things to Xiao Pan.

How can he watch by the side as Lu Buwei carried out his murder plan?

His heart is beating even faster than ever.

He is really dumb and blindly believed history books and movies. He should have predicted this possibility.

If he told everything to King Zhuangxiang honestly, how will he think?

From his intimate relationship with King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji, they will believe what he says. Will history be changed?

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and decide to ignore all the consequences and save King Zhuangxiang's life. Otherwise, he will be guilt-ridden.

At this very moment, an attendant ran in crying: “Crown Prince. The King has fainted at the rear pavilion.”

Xiao Pan’s countenance changed immediately.

Xiang Shaolong’s limbs turned ice-cold. He knows that he is too late and cannot change the wheels of fortune.

Recalling the murderous look in Lu Buwei’s eyes, he realised that it was meant for King Zhuangxiang.

He lost again. But it was due to him being blinded by historical records.

Eight Imperial Physicians are trying their best to save King Zhuangxiang throughout the night. Despite regaining consciousness, he has lost the ability to speak. The Physicians concluded that he had a stroke.

Only Xiang Shaolong can see the pain and hatred in his eyes.

With his pulse becoming weaker and his heart stopping twice, he still managed to summon his adrenaline and continue fighting the devil trying to claim his soul

When Lu Buwei came before him, his eyes glowed with anger and his lips shook, being unable to say what is on his mind.

Zhu Ji was crying her eyes out. Thanks to a palace maid supporting her, she managed to remain standing.

Lady Xiuli and Prince Cheng Chongqiao cried hard as well. Lady Xiuli even fainted and was carried out.

Xiao Pan stood at the bedside and held tightly to King Zhuangxiang's hands. Completely silent, he was amazingly composed.

Only Lu Buwei, Xiang Shaolong, Xu Xian, Lu Gong, Cai Ze, Du Bi and other important officials are allowed to enter his bedroom. The other officials are waiting for the latest news outside the palace.

King Zhuangxiang suddenly pulled Xiao Pan's hands away and pointed to Xiang Shaolong with much effort.

Lu Buwei's eyes shone with anger and faced Xiang Shaolong, exclaiming: "Your Majesty wishes to see you!" He stood aside, leaving Xiao Pan alone by his bedside.

Xiang Shaolong was filled with regret and hatred. If he had thought of Lu Buwei's plot to kill King Zhuangxiang, he will have exposed his scheme. Ultimately, he cannot win fate and lost by one stance.

He came to the bedside and kneeled down, grasping King Zhuangxiang's hand tightly.

Straining hard, King Zhuangxiang focused his dimming eyes on his face, sending out a mixture of emotions, including anger, pain and a plea for help.

Among all those present, only Lu Buwei and Xiang Shaolong would

understand his meaning. Although he did not know how Lu Buwei got King Zhuangxiang to consume the poison, it is possible that he poisoned him personally due to their close relations.

Therefore, after regaining consciousness, King Zhuangxiang knew that it was Lu Buwei who poisoned him but is unable to say so because the poison has caused him to become dumb.

Lu Buwei's relative Mo Ao is truly a poisons expert. None of the Imperial Physician could detect the presence of poison.

Holding onto King Zhuangxiang's trembling hands, Xiang Shaolong could not stop his tears from coming out.

Even Xiao Pan who was expressionless all this while suddenly kneeled down and starting crying loudly.

The palace guards and maids were affected and began sobbing as well.

Xiang Shaolong could not bear to see him suffer in silence. He leaned forward and whispered so softly that only Xiao Pan can hear him: "Rest assured Your Majesty. I will kill Lu Buwei and avenge you."

Xiao Pan was terribly shaken but maintained his silence.

King Zhuangxiang's eyes flickered, revealing surprise, comfort and gratitude. The look quickly subsided as he closed his eyes and his head leaned to one side, without any strength left. He passed away like that.

The bedroom was filled with loud crying. Everyone from the palace maid to the high-ranking officials kneeled all over the floor.

In name, Xiao Pan is now the King of Qin.

By the time Xiang Shaolong got home to Wu Residence, it was deep into the night.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun and himself are not in their best mood.

Without King Zhuangxiang, Lu Buwei is unstoppable. Before Xiao Pan is twenty one and officially crowned King, Lu Buwei the Left Premier will dominate Qin politics.

Zhu Ji will become another influential person.

Unfortunately for her, she does not have her own organization and can only rely on Lu Buwei.

Supporting each other mutually, they form a powerful alliance.

To a certain degree, Xiang Shaolong knew that he is the reason Lu Buwei poisoned King Zhuangxiang.

As Li Si has observed, King Zhuangxiang and Lu Buwei's views are more and more divided. Adding fuel to fire is Wu Tingwei's betrayal. Lu Buwei is worried that Xiang Shaolong will report his plot to King Zhuangxiang and he will lose all his wealth, power, titles and men overnight. Also hoping for his

own son to ascend the throne as soon as possible, he took the risk and carried out the poisoning.

Half of the Qin court is on his side.

His only lapse is that he will never imagine that Xiao Pan is not his real son.

The three men sat together in the main hall. Even though they are exhausted, they do not feel like sleeping.

Teng Yi asked in a deep voice: "Is Lu Buwei behind this?"

Xiang Shaolong nodded: "I am positive."

Jing Jun was young and impulsive. Jumping up, he cried: "I am going to tell everyone I know and see how he can still lie through his teeth."

But seeing the wooden expressions of his two elder brothers, he went back to his seat.

Teng Yi suggested: "Why don't we leave Xianyang City now? While the King has just passed away and Lu Buwei is busy with the state funeral, we leave Qin as far behind us as possible."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself. If not for Xiao Pan, he may do this. For the safety of the women and his men, he can put aside all his enmity. But right now, he just cannot leave.

Teng Yi advised: "It is never too late to take revenge. The opportunity to leave now is once in a lifetime. Lu Buwei hates you to the core. He just needs to find some lame excuse and he can annihilate us."

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Can Second Brother leave first? And take everyone with you."

Teng Yi was horrified: "What else is there in Xianyang City that is worth Third Brother's attention?"

Jing Jun interceded: "Third Brother has to protect Empress Ji and Prince Zheng. I don't think Lu Buwei dare to attack us openly. If he attacks us in secret, we can still counter him."

Xiang Shaolong decided: "Little Jun, you get some rest first. I have something to discuss with Second Brother."

Jing Jun thought that he wanted to persuade Teng Yi on his own and left.

Xiang Shaolong was quiet for a long while.

Teng Yi sighed: "Shaolong! Seriously speaking, we are closer than real brothers. What is it that you cannot say to me? If you are not leaving, neither am I. If we must die, we will die together."

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and whispered: "Prince Zheng is actually Lady's Ni son."

Teng Yi was flabbergasted: “What!?”

Xiang Shaolong told him the whole story.

Teng Yi was upset: “Why didn’t you tell me earlier? Are you afraid that I will betray you?”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely state: “Of course I trust you. Otherwise, I will not reveal it now. Actually this secret is a heavy responsibility. I only wish to carry it alone.”

Teng Yi’s face warmed up and offered: “Since this is the case, we shall remain in Xianyang City and face off with Lu Buwei. But we must prepare an exit strategy and leave if necessary. With our elite army, as long as it is not fighting the Qin army, we can still keep our lives.”

Xiang Shaolong assured: “Little Jun is right. Lu Buwei dared not attack us openly. But hidden attacks are hard to detect. After King Zhuangxiang’s funeral, we will retreat to the farms and observe accordingly. It may be eight years before Xiao Pan’s coronation but he is still considered the King of Qin. His word is law. Even if Lu Buwei is daring, he will not ignore his instructions.”

Teng Yi cautioned: “Do not underestimate him. This man has all the guts in the world and love to take risks. He alone has caused the death of two generations of Qin Kings. That shows how formidable he is. Moreover, he has unorthodox people helping him. Even if he does not attack us openly, we must still have watertight precautions.”

Xiang Shaolong agreed: “Thanks for your pointers. I have been too complacent. Xiao Pan is still a child and let’s hope Empress Ji do not give him up for Lu Buwei.”

Teng Yi sighed: “That is my biggest worry.”

Frantic footsteps can be heard approaching them.

Both men looked at each other and felt uneasy at the same time.

An elite warrior named Wu Jie who is based at the farm came running in. Prostrating on the floor, he wailed: “Master Wu has passed away!”

Like a bolt from the blue, both men were stunned.

Xiang Shaolong felt like he was floating in the air without a care in the world. For a moment, all his sorrows are forgotten.

In a split second, he understood why Lu Buwei invited them to Xianyang City for a banquet. Luring them away from the farms, he got Wu Tingwei the traitor to carry out his devious plan and gain control of the farms.

Luckily, Tao Fang rushed back in time. Otherwise, the news of Wu Yingyuan’s death will not reach them so soon.

Jing Jun ran into the room and wondered what happened. After he was informed, his face was covered with hot tears. With an indignant face, he ran towards the main door.

Teng Yi barked: “Stand still!”

Jing Jun ran a few more steps before he fell onto the floor crying.

Teng Yi grabbed Wu Jie up from the floor and shake him, asking: “What did Master Tao say?”

Wu Jie added: “Master Tao ordered Master (Wu) Guo and Master (Pu) Bu to lead the family warriors and arrested Third Master, Fourth Master and Master Tingwei. He requested you three Masters to return to the farms at once.”

Teng Yi released his hold and the exhausted Wu Jie collapsed back to the floor. Going to a crestfallen Xiang Shaolong, he grabbed him by the shoulders and reminded: “This is a life and death situation. If Third Brother cannot be decisive, the entire Wu Family will be annihilated.”

Xiang Shaolong was at a loss: “What can I do? You want me to kill them?”

Teng Yi insisted: “That is right. If you don’t kill them, they will kill you. These idiots actually believe Lu Buwei, thinking that Lu Buwei will not kill them to seal their mouths. If I am not mistaken, Lu Buwei’s men are on their way to the farms right now. They will take advantage of the Wu family chaos to kill them once and for all.”

To Jing Jun, he roared: “Little Jun! If we are not dead, there are many opportunities for you to cry in the future. Get out there now and keep watch for suspicious people. At the same time, prepare our horses.”

Jing Jun jumped up and led the Eighteen Guardians, who had just come in, out of Wu Residence.

Xiang Shaolong sobered up and suppressed his grief. He asked their informant Wu Jie: "Did you come in from the city gate?"

Wu Jie answered: "Master Tao instructed me to climb over the city wall and avoid detection."

Teng Yi and Xiang Shaolong exchanged glances, impressed by Tao Fang steadiness in the face of danger.

Wu Jie added: "We have over a hundred men waiting for you three masters outside the city and we have prepared the best horses. Will the three masters please leave at once!"

In this instant, Wu Yan Zhu frantically ran in shouting: "The situation looks bad. There are hundreds of men approaching us among the darkness in the South-western and Eastern-north direction."

Teng Yi ordered: "Set fire to the residence at once. This will attract people to save the fire and they will not dare to act rashly. This can also save the lives of the maids and servants."

Wu Yan Zhu left to execute his order.

Teng Yi faced Xiang Shaolong and stated: "Has Third Brother made up his mind?"

Xiang Shaolong actually smiled: "I have no other choice. From today onwards, whoever tries to go against me will have a taste of their own medicine."

In this era where fighting decides the fate of everyone, it is the only solution.

Xiang Shaolong finally understood this reality.

Teng Yi nodded: "That's better. Are you ready to go?"

The sound of cackling fire is heard. The storeroom at the back garden has just caught fire.

The Wu Residence stood alone and away from the neighbouring houses. While the northern wind is strong, the fire will still not spread to the nearby buildings.

The air is filled with people shouting for help to save the fire.

The neighbours will not know about this fire so soon. Those shouting to save the fire are those who set the fire in the first place.

Xiang Shaolong regained his spirits and commanded: "Let's rush back now."

In this moment, he is officially against Lu Buwei.

Until now, Lu Buwei has been gaining the upper hand.

When is his nightmare going to end?

Chapter 03

Exposing The Plot

As everyone rode towards the city gates, the sky is beginning to brighten.

Xiang Shaolong just turned onto the road leading out of the city when he held his horse to a halt.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun, the Eighteen Guardians and Wu Jie, as well as some of the elite brothers hurriedly come to a stop as well.

The cold morning wind is blowing hard at their clothes.

The long road seems deserted but a killing aura can be felt in the air.

With the wind blowing and leaves falling, the trees on both sides rustled.

Xiang Shaolong smiled bitterly: “No matter what, I must fetch Yanran before I can leave in peace.”

Teng Yi was dazed and frowned: “She is with Qin Qing and should be safe.”

Xiang Shaolong insisted: “I understand but I still feel uneasy. Ai! I am sorry.”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun looked at each other and both of them have a helpless look on their face. The trip back to the farms must not be delayed and cannot

afford this additional time lapse.

Wu Jie suggested: “Master Xiang! Why don’t you send someone to fetch her?”

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi exchanged glances, both feeling nervous about this. They were reminded about the time when they left for Wei and wanted to change their travelling path but was strongly objected by Lu Xiong.

The elite squad members have been through the toughest training. When their superiors are talking, they are taught never to interrupt. Why is this Wu Jie so courageous? Would Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi be so dim witted to require his advice?

Xiang Shaolong’s suspicions are raised and he lied: “Shall Wu Jie and Master Jing fetch her on my behalf?”

Wu Jie was taken aback and protested: “That would be wrong! I still have to guide Master Xiang and Master Teng, Ao!”

Under Teng Yi’s gestures, Wu Yan Zhu and We Shu rode up from behind. Using their long swords, they held Wu Jie hostage.

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes are shining coldly and laughed icily: “Wu Jie, do you know where you went wrong and exposed yourself”

Wu Jie’s countenance changed: “I did not! I am not a spy!” The moment he said these words, he knew that he has let the cat out of the bag.

Knowing that Xiang Shaolong has a high standing in the Wu Family and is exceedingly farsighted. In front of him, Wu Jie was psychologically affected and gave his game away.

Jing Jun blew his top and barked: "Pull him down the horse!"

Bang!

Wu Shu delivered a kick and sent Wu Jie falling down from his horse. Before he can stand up, Teng Yi jumped down his horse, held him up by his hair and punched him squarely in his abdomen.

Wu Jie was in so much pain his body curled up. Two of the Guardians held him up and forced him to stand straight.

Jing Jun came in front of him and drew out a dagger. Pressing it against his throat, he coldly promised: "One lie and this dagger will pierce your throat. I will only pierce a reasonable hole so that you will slowly bleed to death in about ten days."

Wu Jie's face turned as white as snow. Breaking down, he sobbed: "It is Young Master who forced me to do this. Ai! It is all my fault! I owe him a lot of money in the past."

Everyone was enlightened and thanked their lucky stars. If not for Xiang Shaolong wanting to fetch Ji Yanran, they would be ambushed and died a wrongful death.

What a devious plot!

Xiang Shaolong regained some hope and interrogated: “Is Master Wu really dead?”

Wu Jie shook his head: “That is a lie. Everything is the same at the farms. Young Master only wanted to get rid of you three. Otherwise, I will not do it. Ya!”

Wu Shu hit him at the waist with his knee.

Xiang Shaolong could feel his spirits rising and ordered: “This chap shall be handed to Second Brother to be further interrogated. Little Jun and I are going over to Qin Qing’s residence. After we fetched Yanran, we will plan our next step.”

After fixing a place to meet, he rode with Jing Jun towards Qin Qing’s residence and was grateful for a narrow escape.

On the road, Xiang Shaolong felt like a brand new man.

If Lu Buwei’s plots all came from this man called Mo Ao, then this man is the most clever and devious man who is also well-versed with psychological attacks.

If this plan succeeded, he will only outlive King Zhuangxiang by two days.

This is a chain plot.

First, Lu Buwei could not kill Xiang Shaolong at the red pine forest. He turned his attention to Wu Tingwei who indulges in wine and women. Using Lao Ai and a courtesan, he made use of his unhappiness with Xiang Shaolong and got him to switch sides.

To gain Lu Buwei's favour, he disclosed the Wu Family plans to leave. This traitor was then determined to eliminate Xiang Shaolong for good.

The plan to poison King Zhuangxiang should have been prepared much earlier in order to consolidate his power.

So Lu Buwei used the banquet to lure him to Xianyang City. After King Zhuangxiang's death, he will lure him out of the city and assassinate him on the roads.

Now that Qin is in chaos over King Zhuangxiang's death and Xiang Shaolong is the sworn-enemy of the six states, no one will be bothered if he is killed.

The lie about Wu Yingyuan's death, chaos in the farm is not without loopholes.

From Wu Jie's words, Tao Fang seems to be overrated. But King Zhuangxiang has just been poisoned to death. Already mentally unsettled, they will not be surprised if Lu Buwei poisoned Wu Yingyuan as well.

In reality, Wu Tingwei may be useless but he is only anti-Xiang Shaolong and not so heartless to take his own father's life.

With the potential threat of enemies attacking the farms, they do not have much time to think things over but to hastily rush back to the farm. This way, they will fall straight into Lu Buwei's well-thought trap.

If not for Xiang Shaolong's love for Ji Yanran, they will die without even knowing why.

Xiang Shaolong let out a long breath and gathered his courage. Whipping his horse, he and Jing Jun rode along the wide roads of Xianyang City towards Qin Qing's residence.

In white mourning clothes, Qin Qing received the two men in her main hall.

Without makeup, her original and enchanting beauty overwhelmed them. They dared not look straight at her but could not resist feasting their eyes on her appearance.

Jing Jun was completely awe-struck. When he was served tea by a maid, he held the cup foolishly in the hand and did not even take a few sips.

Qin Qing calmly asked: "Grand Tutor Xiang came here so early in the morning. Is there something urgent?"

Xiang Shaolong can sense the displeasure in her tone. He apologised: "It is nothing urgent. We wish to fetch Yanran back to the farms!"

Finished, he felt that his reason lacked strength. It was decided earlier than Yanran would stay for a few days but they are fetching her before three days

has passed. In such a hurried fashion and so early in the morning, it is considered a rude gesture.

Qin Qing instructed someone to notify Ji Yanran and furrowed her long eyelashes in deep thought.

Xiang Shaolong sipped the hot tea and looked around him.

The hall was simply decorated without a hint of luxury. Its humbleness reflects the class and taste of its female owner.

Qin Qing plainly stated: "For Grand Tutor Xiang to change his mind so suddenly, don't you think you owe me a proper explanation?"

Xiang Shaolong was feeling troubled and remained silent.

He could not bear to lie to her.

Qin Qing softly sighed: "Don't feel bad. At least you will not tell lies like others. If you leave like this with the recent death of His Majesty, you will invite rumours and gossips."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: "I will come back shortly. Ai! There are many things in the world that is beyond our control."

Qin Qing repeated 'Beyond our control' a few times. She suddenly asked in a soft voice: "Does Grand Tutor Xiang think that His Majesty's death is rather unexpected?"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned that she has suspicions regarding King Zhuangxiang's death. He is committed to mislead her or she will be harmed by Lu Buwei and frantically replied: "The Imperial Physicians will know what is going on."

Qin Qing raised her petite face and eyed him with suspicion and coldly state: "I wish to know your personal thoughts."

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong is looking into her eyes without any reservations. Trying his best to suppress the guilt in his eyes, he sighed: "My brain is in a mess and I have not thought about that."

Qin Qing's eyes bore straight at him and continued her icy dialogue: "In that case, what did Grand Tutor Xiang say into His Majesty's ears that caused him to put his mind at ease and die in peace. Only Prince Zheng heard what you said but he is unwilling to tell me and Empress Ji."

Xiang Shaolong's limbs turned ice-cold, recognizing that he has committed a serious error.

The words he said were right but the problem is he did not fix a lie with Xiao Pan.

If someone questions and they said different things, it will show that one of them is lying.

He was only concerned about Lu Buwei and whispered to King Zhuangxiang. He forgot that on the other side of the bed, there were Zhu Ji, Lady Xiuli and

a bunch of palace maids. Sooner or later, Lu Buwei may know about this as well.

Thanks to Qin Qing's reminder, he can try to salvage this via Li Si.

Qin Qing saw that his face is changing colour. When she was about to question further, Ji Yanran came in.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up and sighed: "Grand Tutor Qin's life has always been peaceful and does not meddle in worldly affairs. I do not wish to see Grand Tutor embroiled in complicated affair."

Leading Ji Yanran, he bade farewell and left.

Staring at Xiang Shaolong, Qin Qing's eyes revealed mixed feelings. Except arranging to meet up with Ji Yanran in the future, she did not say anything more to Xiang Shaolong. However, Xiang Shaolong could feel that she is beginning to understand him better.

When they met up with Teng Yi, Ji Yanran has been updated about everything that has happened.

The traitor Wu Jie is riding a horse but his legs are tied to the harness. Unless one looks carefully, he looks like any other horseman.

Everyone rode out of the city towards the farms.

Entering a dense forest, they stopped.

Jing Jun tied Wu Jie to a tree and instructed the Eighteen Guardians to keep watch.

Teng Yi's expression grows serious and detailed: "The people ambushing us are led by Lu Buwei's top guy Guan Zhongxie. Although with only a hundred and fifty warriors, they are the best fighters from Premier Residence. Master Tu did not even know about this at all. It appears to me that the balance of power is slowly shifting to Mo Ao and Guan Zhongxie."

Xiang Shaolong enquired: "Where are they planning to ambush us?"

Teng Yi pointed to a nearby valley named Plum Valley and state: "Of course they chose a place that is hard for us to escape. Based on our present strength, fighting them is like throwing an egg against a stone. A bigger issue is that Wu Jie has revealed our secrets to Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly. So Lu Buwei has identified Wu Tingwei as their weakest link a long time ago. Since they have no idea about his treachery, they are always one step slower than him.

Ji Yanran simply countered: "We need not panic yet. I am sure Brother-in-law and Wu Jie have limited knowledge about our real strength."

Xiang Shaolong agreed that it was a close shave. While raising this army of five thousand elite warriors, he included the classification of secrets as well from his 21st century military training. Except for them, the core leaders of the elite army, their subordinates only react to orders. Any one of them alone will not have complete information about army strength, fighting

prowess, armour and weapons. They will know things on a need to know basis. To further limit information outflow, they are strictly prohibited from discussing their training. As a result, Wu Jie's knowledge is limited.

Teng Yi nodded: "It is fortunate that we have precautions in place. But Lu Buwei will be extra wary of us. Hng! What shall we do now?"

Ji Yanran implored: "Where is Brother-in-law now?"

Teng Yi replied: "Of course he is back at the farm waiting for good news and to avoid suspicions at the same time. Guan Zhongxie will naturally kill Wu Jie. Dead men tell no tales."

Ji Yanran proposed: "That's great. We will return to the farm now and force Brother-in-law and Wu Jie to verify each other's words. We must find out if there are any other traitors in the family. After we have solved our internal problem, we will fight to the end with Lu Buwei. Worse come to worse, we simply die! We must take revenge for Princess Qian and those who died for us."

Xiang Shaolong was agonized. Lu Buwei will enjoy at least another eight years of power and he does not know his own ending as it is not stated in history. The weather for the future looks gloomy indeed.

He nodded: "We will let Guan Zhongxie live a while longer. Let's return to the farms!"

Silent all these while, Jing Jun signalled and summoned the Eighteen

Guardians. Together with Wu Jie, they took a left detour back towards the farms.

As the travelling distance is much longer, they are still twenty miles from the farms at nightfall.

As everyone was preparing to pitch their tents, Xiang Shaolong sounded: “Wait! Master Tu mentioned that Guan Zhongxie is both clever and highly-skilled. We took so much time to leave the city and will raise his suspicions. He will send spies and they will soon find out that we have changed our travelling path. It is better to play safe. Even if we have overestimated him, it is still better than to lose our lives.”

Jing Jun jumped up excitedly: “If he attacks us during the night, I will let them taste their own medicine.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled: “My sentiments exactly.”

The campsite was situated beside a small river.

Five tents are surrounding a weak fire and there are straw men asleep in the tents and standing guard. It looks just as real unless one looks closely.

Hiding in a dense forest uphill, their bows and arrows are prepared to give any invaders a surprise.

However, there is no activity even till late into the night.

Last night, they did not sleep at all and travelled the entire day. Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi could not hold back and started yawning.

Ji Yanran suggested: “Why don’t we take turns to sleep or we will all die of tiredness.”

When Xiang Shaolong woke up, he found Ji Yanran still in deep slumber in his arms. The sun is shining strongly and the birds are chirping, heralding Spring.

He could feel tranquillity in his soul as he scrutinized the well-proportioned Ji Yanran sleeping.

Now that he is far away from Xianyang City, he is enjoying the fresh air and the love of this beauty whose body is being illuminated by the sun. All of a sudden, his tense emotions and burdened mind feels like they have been relieved and freed.

Like a Buddha who has gained enlightenment, he realised one thing. The reason why he is on the losing end is because Lu Buwei has been planning against him right from the start and he is burdened by his knowledge that Lu Buwei will remain unchallenged for eight years.

If he continues to remain passive, he will be at the losing end.

He may not be able to kill Lu Buwei in the coming eight years, but history has proven that he will be defeated by Xiao Pan, Li Si, Wang Jian, etc.

In other words, there is no way these people will come to harm.

Since this is the case, why doesn't he borrow their strength and fight till the end with Lu Buwei. King Zhuangxiang's death has proven that no one can change history.

Even if he died, Xiao Pan will avenge him when he is crowned King on his twenty first birthday.

Thinking about this, he completely relaxed.

Teng Yi's voice rang out behind him: "Third Brother is awake!"

Xiang Shaolong tried to move Ji Yanran.

The beauty hummed and woke up. Shyly, she crawled up from Xiang Shaolong bosom and sat to the side. Still dazed from her sleep, she asked: "Guan Zhongxie is not here yet?"

Her lazy yet enchanting posture caused both men to stare blankly at her.

Ji Yanran shot them a dirty look and yelled: "I am going to wash up by the river!"

She was about to take a step when Xiang Shaolong stopped her, warning: "The smart Guan Zhongxie may have seen through our trap. Moreover, the campsite is near the river and it is easy to flee. If I am him, I will move my ambush further down the road or I will wait at the campsite until daybreak. If Yanran goes like this, you will fall into their trap."

Teng Yi came to his side and scrutinized him. Fascinated, he exclaimed: "Third Brother seems like a brand new man. Since the last mission, I have never seen you so full of confidence, fighting spirit and alertness."

Ji Yanran happily added: "Second Brother is right. This is the hero Yanran loves."

Xiang Shaolong knew what they meant. Since untying the dead knot in his heart, he has regained his ambition and heroic air. Summoning Jing Jun and the Eighteen Guardians, he told them his theory.

Jing Jun nodded: "This is easy. We, the Jing village hunters, spend long hours in the wild tracking animals. As long as Guan Zhongxie has his men come near the campsite, even if they just rode one round, we will be able to detect their existence."

Under his command, the six hunters from the Eighteen Guardians left with him.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi further interrogated Wu Jie about Wu Tingwei and discovered that Lao Ai was involved as they suspected.

After they prepared breakfast, the two men went to another side of the slope and admired the beautiful scenery. As they ate their food, Teng Yi sighed: "It is not as bad as we thought. From Wu Jie's confession. Only Wu Tingwei has betrayed us."

Ji Yanran sighed: "He is Tingfang's elder brother. What can we do to him?"

Xiang Shaolong coldly snorted: “There is no more relationships to talk about. If we don’t kill him, we will send him outside the central plains and let Big Brother imprison him there. He will never step into Qin for eternity.”

Teng Yi was pleased: “Second Brother has regained the composure you had as Dong Horse Fanatic in Handan City.”

Jing Jun was seen hurrying back. Full of respect, he reported: “Third Brother has excellent foresight. Two miles away from the camp, we discovered horse dropping and signs of grass that has been eaten by horses. Following the trail, we detected that the enemy has relocated the ambush further up north.”

Teng Yi was astonished: “He knows the place well. That is a path we must use to get home. Unless we turn back and use another route, we will have to climb over the mountains.”

Xiang Shaolong stared at the river below and concluded: “He will leave some men to continue spying on us. In this wilderness, he can do whatever he wants. The men he left behind should already be more than enough to eliminate us.”

Ji Yanran mused: “This Guan Zhongxie is so clever. He will leave some men behind as hubby had guessed. Thus, even if we slip away, they can still pursue us.”

Jing Jun showed the fearless side of him and cursed: “If they have split into two groups to attack us simultaneously from the front and the back, we can

use this against them and attack them separately.”

Teng Yi dismissed: “You are young and reckless, only knowing how to fight. If the enemy surrounds us, how can we escape?”

Jing Jun was dumbfounded.

Xiang Shaolong lied down and stared at the tree branches and clouds above him. He leisurely mentioned: “Let’s have a good sleep first. When the enemy is confused over whether we have left last night or this morning, it will be time to go home.”

Everyone gazed at him with surprise, wondering how he plans to get out of this tight situation.

Chapter 04

An Escape Trick

It is evening time. The clouds in the sky begin to sink and the moisture in the air begins to rise. When they meet, they accumulate and form a thick fog.

On a hill three miles South west from where they are, sounds of men talking and horses neighing can be heard. It appears that the enemies have lost their patience and thought that they have left for the farm long ago.

Up till now, not only did both parties have not exchanged blows, they haven't even seen each other's shadow. But this intangible battle been fought by both parties competing in intelligence, training, patience, strength and strategy. A small error could cause Xiang Shaolong's smaller forces to be entirely wiped out.

Relying on the darkness and fog, Jing Jun and his hunters made sure that they were no spies nearby before pushing three rafts into the river. Securing them with rope, he hid the rafts among the reeds. Once accomplished, they returned to Xiang Shaolong's side and inquired: "What do we do next?"

Regaining his cool and determination as a top elite special forces commando, Xiang Shaolong replied: "It depends on the enemies' movement. Unless I am wrong, the men who were left behind will continue searching this area to confirm that we are not in hiding. Once confirmed, they will contact those men who have moved further down the road. That will be the time to

retaliate.”

Teng Yi nodded: “This is a brilliant move. Once the enemy suffers an ambush, they will retreat back to the path and seal our escape route. At the same time, they will use a flare to inform those men ahead of us. This way, they will surround us from the front and the back. That will be the best time we will use the rafts and leave this area quickly.”

Ji Yanran praised: “Fantastic! Even if Sun Wu is here, he may not be able to think of such an excellent plan.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel his confidence and fighting will improve by leaps and bounds. Under his strict commands, Jing Jun and the Eighteen Guardians divide themselves into groups of threes and fours. Taking up advantageous spots around the campsite, they held their bows ready.

They may be smaller in numbers but every one of them is well-versed in night combat as well as jungle warfare. Their killing ability is not to be taken lightly.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Ji Yanran hid themselves behind some rocks near the hilltop. Their mind at ease, they await the enemies’ appearance.

The new moon rises up slowly to take its place in the sky, surrounded by countless stars. As the fog begins to disperse, the enemies came into view.

They formed ten odd units and are conducting a search slowly along the river.

Opposite the river are another seventeen or eighteen men in three groups. They are the first to enter the firing range of Jing Jun and his three fellow hunters.

Xiang Shaolong and his two companions could sense ten odd men approaching their hiding place. The atmosphere was as tense as a drawn bowstring.

They held their breaths and continue to wait patiently.

As planned, one of their men deliberately provoked a warhorse hidden in the forest. The horse reacts with a loud neighing sound, breaking the silence of the forest.

The enemies begin to move quickly towards the sound of the neighing.

A series of tragic shouts can be heard. Needless to say, the enemies have fallen into animal traps set up by Jing Jun and the hunters. With sharp wooden stakes at the bottom of the pit, a number of men were killed or heavily injured.

Xiang Shaolong and his men knew that it is time. First, they shot out their burning fireballs all around the enemies. It was followed by an endless volley of arrows.

Under the glow of the fire, the attackers were caught unaware and descended into chaos. Cries of help and sound of people falling filled the air. It was a pathetic sight.

The most formidable was of course Teng Yi. Arrows left his bow continuously with rest. The moment an enemy was sighted, his arrow will fly and embed itself in the enemy's body as if it can see.

Since they were hiding in several spots along the river, arrows were shot from different directions and the enemy could not find a safe hiding place at all.

In a short span of time, over ten enemies have been shot dead. Those surviving whistled urgently to retreat and they withdrew in panic.

A flare shot up the sky and exploded into silvery white sparks.

Xiang Shaolong charged downhill and trailed the retreating enemies, striking those in his reach. After he struck down seven or eight men, he returned to the forest. Everyone collected their horses, retrieved Wu Jie, boarded their three rafts and floated downstream.

Finally, they vented some of their suppressed anger.

In the main hall of the Wu Family Farm, like a defeated man, Wu Tingwei and Wu Jie knelt down in front of an incensed Wu Yinguan.

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Wu Guo, Pu Bu, Liu Chao and Tao Fang stood on both sides, staring icily at the two Wu family traitors.

Wu Tingwei continued to protest: "I am only thinking about the family. How can we hope to defeat Premier Lu?"

Wu Yingyuan furiously cursed: "To think that I have been successful all my life and yet give birth to a nitwit and unfilial son. If Lu Buwei manages to kill Shaolong, he will kill you next to seal your mouth. Tell me! Did anyone from Premier Residence arrange to meet you after the ambush?"

Wu Tingwei was taken aback, proving that there is indeed such an arrangement.

He may not be the brightest person around but will still understand a simple philosophy called dead men tell no tales.

Beside him, Wu Jie was shaking with fear, knowing that the house rules are extremely strict.

Wu Yingyuan sighed: "I do what I say. Not only have you disobeyed my order, you are worse than a beast. Men! Bring these two men out to be executed immediately."

Wu Tingwei collapsed and shook with fear, exclaiming: "Father, I am wrong."

Four family warriors came to their sides and restrained them.

Xiang Shaolong interceded: "Father-in-law, please listen to me. Why don't we send him to the north and help Big Brother? This way, he can accumulate merits to compensate for his mistakes."

Wu Yingyuan slowly sighed: "I understand your concern. But this concerns the survival of the whole family. If because he is my own son and I am

lenient, the authority of our Wu Family house rules will be gone. Everyone will not submit and the other family elders will think that I practise favouritism. Originally, I have three sons but I'll take it that I only have two sons. Come! Bring them to the ancestral hall and invite all the family heads to witness. I want everyone to know that family traitors will share the same punishment."

Wu Tingwei realised that his father is not trying to frighten him. His legs turning soft like mud, he begged for mercy.

Xiang Shaolong wanted to say something else.

Wu Yingyuan coldly decided: "I have made up my mind and nothing will change it. I have no hesitation in sacrificing a son and gaining everyone's cooperation."

Everyone was dumbfounded as Wu Tingwei and Wu Jie were dragged out.

Wu Yingyuan is right. His insistence in executing Wu Tingwei has everyone in shock. Nobody else within the family will dare to oppose him in fighting Lu Buwei to the end.

Even such an elaborate plot has failed to take Xiang Shaolong's life, giving hope and confidence to everyone.

The power and prestige of the Wu Family in Xianyang is no longer despised by the Qin population like before.

With the army favouring Xiang Shaolong, including Lu Buwei's general Meng Ao, they are in a much stronger position than before.

Since this plan has failed, Lu Buwei will naturally hatch another plot.

But Wu Tingwei's death has created some problems as well.

His mother Madam Wu and Wu Tingfang became very sick around the same time. Amazingly, Wu Yingyuan is surprising strong-willed and handled the daily affairs as per normal. He summoned his two sons who are doing business and sent them to the north to open up farmlands, focusing on expanding their influence there.

This has been approved by King Zhuangxiang and even Lu Buwei cannot interfere.

Xiang Shaolong busied himself with the training of his army and spent two months in peace and harmony. Today, Tao Fang showed up with the latest news from Xianyang City.

Listening to his report are Wu Yingyuan, Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Wu Yingyuan's two brothers Wu Yingjie and Wu Yingen.

Tao Fang started: "According to Qin customs, after three and a half months since his death, King Zhuangxiang's funeral will be held at the Royal Temple. Every state has sent a representative to pay their respects. Tian Dan is representing Qi; I wonder what he is up to."

Xiang Shaolong was aroused: “For Tian Dan to come personally, he must be up to something. I am not surprised that Qi sent someone as they did not join the combined army fighting Qin six months ago. But aren’t the five states still at war with Qin? Why did they send representatives as well?”

Tao Fang explained: “Prince Xinling’s military seal has been confiscated and is spending his time aimlessly in Daliang. The four armies retreated one after another and made truce with Lu Buwei. Every state is afraid of Qin attacking them and are busy presenting gifts and bribes. Xianyang City will be the centre of attention once again.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that Lord Longyang will definitely represent Wei but who will the other states send? He hates to see people like Li Yuan and Guo Kai again.

Wu Yingyuan questioned: “Anything from Lu Buwei?”

Tao Fang shrugged his shoulders: “I believe he is too busy to pay attention to us. With the change of power, the most important task is to consolidate the country’s authority. I heard that he made several changes to the high-ranking officials and generals with the support of Empress Ji. He did not touch Xu Xian’s or Wang Ling’s men as the official posts that they are occupying are irrelevant.”

Wu Yingen mused: “He will carry out his plot step by step.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Teng Yi faced Xiang Shaolong and enquired: "If we can disrupt the relationship between Lu Buwei and Empress Ji, it will be as good as cutting of one of his limbs. What does Third Brother think?"

Everyone was eyeing him with high expectations. Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed and replied: "I will proceed accordingly."

Tao Fang suggested: "Shaolong should make a quick trip to Xianyang City. Empress Ji has tried to summon you three times but I have rejected them, saying that you are unwell. I don't think it is good to ignore her too many times."

Xiang Shaolong brightened up and resolved: "I will return to Xianyang City tomorrow."

Everyone cheered.

Xiang Shaolong was daydreaming about meeting Empress Ji.

Now that King Zhuangxiang is dead and if Zhu Ji wanted to get close to him, what shall he do?

He has the deepest respect for King Zhuangxiang and should not be getting close to his widow.

This is something unacceptable.

Back at the Hidden Dragon Abode, Ji Yanran is chatting with Wu Tingfang in

private. Wu Tingfang is still sick and bedridden.

With his own brother executed according to the family rules, this beauty's face is dead white and she is so thin until her cheeks have sunk into her face. Xiang Shaolong was grieved.

Ji Yanran saw him coming and stood up, advising: "Have a good chat with Tingfang!" Winking at him, she left the bedroom.

Xiang Shaolong understood that Tingfang hates her own brother for betraying the family and her father for being heartless. With conflicting emotions affecting her mentally, she fell sick.

Sighing to himself, he sat at her bedside and lightly caressed her shoulder. He noticed a bowl in her hand that is still full of medicine and softly asked: "Not taking your medicine again?"

Wu Tingfang's eyes reddened and she lowered her head, sobbing silently.

No one knows her spoilt temper better than Xiang Shaolong. Once she throws a tantrum, no one can calm her down. Bending down to her ear, he whispered: "You are angry at father; but the real culprit is Lu Buwei. Everybody else is innocent. If you take it personally, not only will you remain sick, your mum will also be in bad health. Your father and I will be anxious about the two of you and cannot focus on fighting our real enemies. Do you understand?"

Wu Tingfang thought about it and nodded her head obediently.

Xiang Shaolong wiped away her tears and took this chance to feed her the bowl of medicine, coaxing: "That's my girl. You must get well soon and visit your mum."

Wu Tingfang protested: "The medicine is very bitter!"

Xiang Shaolong kissed her face and covered her with a blanket. He waited until she fell asleep and returned to the hall.

Zhao Zhi, Ji Yanran and the Tian sisters are playing with baby Bao'er. If Wu Tingfang is there as well, it would be perfect.

He received Bao'er from Ji Yanran and watched the sweet smile on his face. His heart swelled up with a strong will.

Lu Buwei can harm him and he can harm Lu Buwei as well.

The first man he must kill is not Lu Buwei but the devious and clever Mo Ao.

For every day he lives, one day, he will come up with a plot that will finally take Xiang Shaolong's life.

Wu Tingfang's health improved greatly. By the third day, she is strong enough to leave her bed and visit her mother.

She has become a quieter person and does not like to talk much or meet people outside the family. However, her eyes are glowing with never-seen-before determination. It seems that Xiang Shaolong's words have untied the

knot in her heart, making her shift her hatred to Lu Buwei.

Now that she has recovered, Xiang Shaolong could finally put his mind at rest. With Teng Yi and Jing Jun, they left for Xianyang City.

The Eighteen Guardians have been increased to Eighty Guardians, increasing their might.

With everyone alert and travelling non-stop, they reached Xianyang City within a day.

Xiang Shaolong entered the palace and sought an audience with Empress Zhu Ji and the soon-to-be-king Xiao Pan.

Zhu Ji has lost considerable weight but Xiao Pan is looking great and energetic, contrasting the mourning clothes that don him.

They were overjoyed to see him. Dismissing their men, Zhu Ji went straight to the point: "Shaolong, what's up with you? Out of the blue, you slipped back to the farm and I cannot even find someone to talk to."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly stunned. With her husband dead, Zhu Ji is like a phoenix that has been set free. Nothing can hold her down anymore. He paid his obeisance to them, took his seat and answered: "Please excuse me, Empress. I have my own troubles as well."

Xiao Pan lowered his head, understanding what he meant.

Zhu Ji demanded: "Tell me about it or I will not let you leave."

From her tone, she did not treat him like a subordinate but as a friend.

Xiao Pan interceded: "Mother, please spare Grand Tutor Xiang. If he can say it, he would have done so."

Zhu Ji exclaimed: "The two of you are ganging up against me?"

Xiao Pan winked warmly at Xiang Shaolong, stating: "I take my leave. Mother should have a good chat with Grand Tutor Xiang!"

Looking at him leaving, Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to pull him back. His biggest fear now is to be alone with Zhu Ji.

When they were alone, Zhu Ji became quiet instead. After some time, she lightly sighed: "Is there some differences between you and Buwei?"

Xiang Shaolong kept quiet.

Zhu Ji scrutinized him for a while and slowly revealed: "When you returned from your last mission, I can tell that you have lost your bearings and seemed to have become a different person. Buwei has a funny look in his eyes when he looks at you. I know him too well. To achieve success, he will resort to all means. Isn't it obvious when he presented me to Zhuangxiang? He told me he will never leave me in the morning and by night I am with another man."

She suddenly asked: "Will Shaolong blame me for not differentiating

between good and evil?”

Only Xiang Shaolong will understand these words.

Zhu Ji, Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei’s fate are intertwined together.

Lu Buwei need Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan to continue his hold of power and run the country legitimately. Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan needs Lu Buwei to manage the opposing court officials.

With rumours that Xiao Pan is Lu Buwei’s son and if Zhu Ji eliminates Lu Buwei, they will be in danger. Without Lu Buwei, before Xiao Pan can be crowned King, they may be toppled down already.

Xiang Shaolong bowed: “How can I blame Empress?”

With an agonized smile, Zhu Ji softly reminded: “Remember the day when we left the Wu Family Fortress in Handan City? I promised Grandmaster Wu that as long as I am alive, Wu family will live in prosperity. I have never forgotten my promise; Shaolong can rest easy.”

Xiang Shaolong was touched that Zhu Ji remembered her promise in times like this and was lost for words.

Zhu Ji brightened up and added: “Two days ago, Xu Xian, Lu Gong and Wang Ling proposed that you be promoted as the Imperial Cavalry Commander, leading ten thousand cavalry and securing the safety of Xianyang City. Lu Buwei objected strongly to their proposal. I did not know how would you feel

and did not insist. I am surprised that the three most powerful men in the military are supporting you. Shaolong! You must not hide anymore. Little Zheng and I need you by our side!”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned. Does Xu Xian and the rest know that he is opposing Lu Buwei?

Zhu Ji wailed: “You! Aren’t you concerned about the Wu family’s safety?”

Xiang Shaolong knew what she meant.

If she must choose between Lu Buwei and himself, she will choose him.

If he can replace Lu Buwei and protect her and Xiao Pan, then Lu Buwei will be unnecessary.

Hatefully, he knew that Lu Buwei will not be easily toppled. It is all recorded in history.

He nodded his head vigorously: “Thanks for Empress’s concern!”

Zhu Ji’s face reddened and she lowered her head, commenting: “As long as you do not treat me like an outsider, I will be satisfied.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I have never considered you as an outsider. But the King has treated me well, how can I... Ai!”

Zhu Ji’s eyes shone with anger, sighing: “How can I forget his love too?”

Shaolong spoke to him before he passed away. I think I can guess what it is. But please do not tell me because I do not want to know it now. I hope Shaolong can take pity on me and my unfavourable circumstances.”

Xiang Shaolong discovers that Zhu Ji is cleverer than he expected. Reminded about Lao Ai, he wonders if he should challenge fate and warn her beforehand. The attendant at the gate suddenly reports: “Right Premier Lu Buwei is here to seek an audience with Empress.”

Xiang Shaolong wished he could disappear into thin air. Of all people, he has to run into his arch enemy today.

Chapter 05

Grand Preparations

Dressed flamboyantly in his official robes, Lu Buwei strode in arrogantly into Zhu Ji's Hall of Kindness. Xiang Shaolong hurriedly got up and greeted him.

Even livelier than before, he scanned Xiang Shaolong and nodded with a smile: "I am so happy to see you again."

A simple sentence that hints strongly at many things! It hints at Xiang Shaolong's sudden disappearance, his 'disregard' of the Qin court and the fact that he is able to stay alive!

He continued to pay his respects to Zhu Ji but did not kneel down, showing the special relationship he shares with her. With her support, he does not see himself as a subordinate any more.

Lu Buwei sat opposite Xiang Shaolong and smiled: "With shameless individuals coming in with evil intentions and creating trouble, these are trying times for the Qin Court. If Shaolong has nothing urgent, why don't you stay in Xianyang City? I may have some tasks for you."

Xiang Shaolong nodded in consent but secretly admired Lu Buwei's psychological warfare. Using the present danger as an excuse, he forced Zhu Ji to cooperate with him.

Turning to Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei asked: “What are Empress and Shaolong talking about?”

A simple sentence like this betrayed Lu Buwei’s proud attitude. After all, he is a subject of Empress Ji and who is he to question Empress Ji about her affairs?

Zhu Ji was not angry and plainly state: “I am just asking about his recent activities!”

Anger flashed his eyes as Lu Buwei coldly dismissed: “Shaolong, please leave us alone. I have something important to discuss with Empress.”

Xiang Shaolong was annoyed at his comment, indicating that he is not fit to join in their discussion.

He was about to take his leave when Zhu Ji interrupted: “Shaolong, hold your step. How can Premier Lu treat Shaolong like an outsider?”

Lu Buwei was shocked but put on a smile: “It is not that. He has no interests in court affairs and I do not want to burden him!”

Zhu Ji nonchalantly asked: “Premier Lu is so impatient; what can be so important?”

Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei knew that Zhu Ji is throwing her temper and is obviously siding with Xiang Shaolong. Lu Buwei will not be so foolish to continue rebutting her and went along, smiling: “Empress, please do not take

offence. I wanted to see you as I have an excellent recommendation for the Imperial Cavalry Commander.”

The Imperial Cavalry Commander is the next post after An Gu to work closely with the royal family.

Xianyang City is protected by three armies. They are the palace guards protecting the palace and the Imperial Infantry and Imperial Cavalry defending the city. The Imperial Infantry are foot soldiers and Imperial Cavalry are soldiers on horseback.

If you combine both Imperial Infantry and Imperial Cavalry, it will be the same as Xiang Shaolong’s City Commander back at Handan City. It is just a separation of armies.

There are thirty thousand foot soldiers, three times more than the cavalry. But if you compare the honour and rank, the Imperial Cavalry Commander is more prestigious than the Imperial Infantry Commander.

Zhu Ji coldly concluded: “Premier Lu need not recommend anyone. I have decided to promote Shaolong to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander. Except for him, there is nobody else I will trust.”

Lu Buwei could not imagine the normally-obedient Zhu Ji decided on this matter and did not offer any room for discussion. His face changing colour slightly, he glanced at Xiang Shaolong with surprise and checked: “Shaolong has changed your mind?”

Xiang Shaolong understood where Zhu Ji is coming from and she is indeed formidable. She did not want to live in Lu Buwei's shadow forever. Now that Xiang Shaolong has gained the respect of the army and is the Imperial Cavalry Commander, he can check Lu Buwei's influence. Thus, Lu Buwei dare not act hastily and disregard her and Xiao Pan. Through Xiang Shaolong, she need not always bend her will and support Lu Buwei blindly.

Xiang Shaolong knew that Lu Buwei is pretending to be concerned but is actually forcing him to give up this promotion. Then he can recommend the person he has in mind. Xiang Shaolong smiled: "As Premier Lu mentioned, it is trying times for Qin. I can only put my personal responsibilities and accept this challenging position."

Anger shooting out of his eyes, Lu Buwei faked a smile and coughed: "Good. Since Empress thinks so highly of you, do not disappoint her!"

Zhu Ji plainly asked: "Does Premier Lu have anything else to say?"

Lu Buwei was infuriated but dare not argue with her, knowing that he has crossed the line earlier. He reported: "Qi Chancellor Tian Dan, Chu Imperial Uncle Li Yuan, Zhao General Pang Junyu arrived in Xianyang City yesterday. They hope to meet Empress and Crown Prince before attending the late king's funeral."

Zhu Ji coldly hissed: "We are still dressed in mourning clothes. What is there to see? Wait till the late king is buried first!"

This is the first time Lu Buwei is being admonished by Zhu Ji in such a manner

and knew that it was due to Xiang Shaolong. He hid his feelings well and did not reveal any discontentment. After exchanging a few more words with Zhu Ji, he left.

The Hall of Kindness is completely noiseless.

After a long while, Zhu Ji sighed: "I have secretly ordered everyone who saw you speaking to King Zhuangxiang to keep it a secret. Violators will be sentenced to death. Buwei should be ignorant about this matter."

Xiang Shaolong was grateful: "Thank you Empress!"

Zhu Ji sighed: "Shaolong! I am so tired. So what if I have everything? I just cannot bring myself to be happy."

Xiang Shaolong knew that she is trying to get him to comfort her. He advised: "Empress must pull yourself together. The Crown Prince still needs your guidance and care."

Under such circumstances, he cannot bring up Lao Ai's issue.

Firstly, he cannot explain how he could forecast Lao Ai seducing her. Moreover, if Zhu Ji wants him to replace this future Lao Ai, he will be in trouble.

He knows that history can never be changed.

Zhu Ji was quiet for a while and softly added: "You must be careful of General

Pang from Zhao. He is famous for his strategies and is very articulate. He is the new City Commander and is the most prestigious general in Zhao after Lian Po and Li Mu. For him to come personally, he must be here to spy on our army strength. Ai! I really do not know what Buwei is planning. Now, he is very close to the six states as if nothing has happened.”

Xiang Shaolong is not bothered with this General Pang that he has never heard before. If not for Guo Kai’s intimacy with Zhu Ji in the past and dare not come, this man will not even have the chance to come to Qin.

Both of them do not know what to say next.

After some unimportant exchanges, Xiang Shaolong bade his farewell. Zhu Ji is unwilling to let him go but is afraid of rumours and let him leave.

The moment he left the Empress palace, An Gu stepped up welcoming: “The Crown Prince wants to see Grand Tutor.”

Xiang Shaolong walked with him towards the Crown Prince palace.

This head of the palace guards whispered: “After Grand Tutor has seen the Crown Prince, can you make a trip to General Lu Gong’s residence?”

Xiang Shaolong understood his meaning and nodded in agreement.

An Gu did not say anything else. He escorted him to the Crown Prince study room and left.

With a heavy expression, Xiao Pan was seated on a long sofa north of the study room. Waving the usual courtesies aside, he got Xiang Shaolong to sit in front of him and viciously declare: "Grand Tutor! I want to kill Lu Buwei!"

Xiang Shaolong was flabbergasted and exclaimed: "What!?"

Xiao Pan detailed in a low voice: "This is a violent man who forgets about father's benevolence and is worse than wild beasts. He claims to be a pioneering official in the rebirth of Qin and even planted his own son to be the next King of Qin. Without his death, I cannot consolidate my power as King."

Xiang Shaolong had intended to contact Xiao Pan, Li Si and Wang Jian to make trouble for Lu Buwei. He was astounded that Xiao Pan brought this up before he could. Hesitating, he asked: "Have you spoken to Empress about this?"

Xiao Pan answered: "Empress and Lu Buwei are deeply embroiled. If I told her, I will be scolded instead. Grand Tutor! With your invincible sword skills and intelligence, killing him should be easy right!"

Xiang Shaolong thought of Guan Zhongxie and felt that he is overrated by Xiao Pan but he could not say this to him. He sighed: "If we killed him, what will be the consequences?"

Showing the mature side of him, Xiao Pan detailed: "First, I will make you the Imperial Cavalry Commander. I will select a few loyal men and entrust them with important positions. If we can consolidate our power, we do not need

that traitor. I am only afraid of Empress. If she works with him, we will be in trouble.”

Xiang Shaolong questioned: “Do you love Empress?”

Xiao Pan was stunned and nodded.

Only Xiang Shaolong can understand him. Xiao Pan has gradually shifted his love for Lady Ni to Zhu Ji.

Xiao Pan is right. Zhu Ji knew that King Zhuangxiang was poisoned by Lu Buwei but did not hold it against him.

Xiang Shaolong explained: “I want to kill him more than you do. You should have guessed that he was the real culprit who caused Princess Qian’s death. But before we have built up our strength, we should not act hastily. Moreover, the Qin military system is extremely complicated and it is hard to manage them. With a group of them supporting Prince Cheng Chongqiao, it is better for us to bear with him for the time being.”

Xiao Pan brightened up and asked: “So Grand Tutor has agreed to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I have just promised Empress!”

Xiao Pan was pleased: “I am relieved to have Master by my side.”

In this moment, he became a kid again.

His expression turning heavy again, he added: “Grand Tutor’s foresight is unparalleled. Study Attendant Li Si is the best example. His thinking is totally unlike other people and taught me that if we can grab hold of this opportunity and utilise our strengths well, we can expand out territories and eventually unite the world. So I must not let this heartless cad Lu Buwei control the Qin Court and affect my grand plan.”

Xiang Shaolong finally realised Li Si’s influence on Xiao Pan. He cannot regard Xiao Pan as a child anymore. Under the influence of the Qin Palace politics, he has become another person. And in the future, he shall be the first Emperor of China.

Xiao Pan coldly inquired: “How long to I have to wait?”

Xiang Shaolong calmly forecast: “The best time to act is at your coronation on your twenty-first birthday.”

This is right, because this is history.

Xiao Pan was mortified: “I would have to wait for another eight years!? Wouldn’t Lu Buwei be beyond control by then?”

Xiang Shaolong reasoned: “During this time, we can use him to eliminate those men who oppose your rule and at the same time, we can nurture your own organization and weaken his at the same time.”

Pausing, he emphasized: “For politics, you can let Lu Buwei handle them as long as Xu Xian is there to keep him in check. You must do your best to gain

the respect of the military. Let Lu Buwei be the bad guy and we remain as the good guys. With control of the military, Lu Buwei will not be able to escape your clutches. It has been proven time and time again that governing authority comes after military might.”

Xiao Pan’s body shook heavily as he repeated: “Authority after military.”

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself for saying too much and continued: “There are two men who are loyal to us. They are Wang Jian and Wang Ben. They are terrific generals whom every King wishes to possess. With them leading your army, Lu Buwei is nothing to be afraid of.”

In a daze, Xiao Pan asked: “What about you?”

Xiang Shaolong commented: “I will do my best to help you but in the end, I am still an outsider. You must win the hearts and minds of the Qin military and use them to consolidate your power.”

Xiao Pan frowned: “But Lu Buwei has Meng Ao fighting for him and has made his two sons Meng Wu and Meng Tian assistant generals to assist Meng Ao in his battles. What can I do to counter them?”

Xiang Shaolong replied: “That is why Lu Buwei wanted to get rid of me. If Meng Ao discovers that his two sons nearly died under his scheming, how do you think he will feel? The two Meng brothers will eventually come to our side. You can use them to help you and it can even lessen Lu Buwei’s suspicions.”

Xiao Pan was delighted: “There is no one better than Grand Tutor. I know what to do.”

After further discussion, Xiang Shaolong took his leave.

Compared to Lu Buwei’s new Premier Residence that is still being constructed, Lu Gong’s residence is far from the Qin palace. Lu Gong invited Xiang Shaolong into a private chamber where an attendant served him tea and left them alone. Lu Gong smiled: “I heard that you are a descendant of Qin. However, there has never been anyone surnamed Xiang here. May I know which tribe do you belong to?”

Xiang Shaolong was in a dilemma and lied: “My surname came from my mother. I did not know who my father is, not to mention which tribe he came from. All I know that he was a Qin soldier. Ai! What a mess.”

Lu Gong, the advocate of Qin, did not suspect anything and nodded: “The people of Zhao are not as imposing and powerfully built as you. Your type of figure is not even seen often in Qin. You must be a mixed blood. I am good at judging people. Hei! From the first time I met you, I know that you are a righteous man.”

Xiang Shaolong found himself understanding him better. Amused, he praised: “Lu Gong has great eyesight and I cannot hide anything from you.”

Lu Gong sighed: “It will be great if I can really see everything. But I have miscalculated many things, including the early death of the late king. Ai!”

Xiang Shaolong quietened down.

Lu Gong stared sharply at him but in a calm and slow manner, asked: “What is the relationship between Shaolong and Lu Buwei?”

Once again, Xiang Shaolong was taken aback at his frankness and replied: “Why is Lu Gong interested?”

Lu Gong plainly state: “Shaolong need not deceive me. Lu Buwei and you are not on the best of terms. Otherwise, the Wu family need not hide in the countryside farms. Speak your mind! The Wu clan are the descendents of our Qin nobles. From our point of view, they are way better than Lu Buwei the outsider.”

After such a long time in Xianyang City, this is the first time Xiang Shaolong has experienced Qin’s racism. He sighed: “It’s a long story. After I propose Xu Xian to be the Premier, Premier Lu has been holding a grudge against me.”

Lu Gong smiled: “How can it be so simple? In Xianyang City, you are his number one enemy. Don’t tell me you have no idea!”

His eyes shining with deep thoughts, he slowly added: “All along, there have been rumours saying that the Crown Prince is not King Zhuangxiang’s son but Lu Buwei’s. At first, we discard them as lies spread by people who are opposing Lu Buwei and Empress Ji. Now, the healthy King Zhuangxiang suddenly died without a clear reason and we are forced to reconsider this issue.”

Xiang Shaolong can feel a gigantic headache coming. Lu Gong is the most respected man in the Qin military and his words represent the thinking of the Qin military leaders. If they regard Xiao Pan as Lu Buwei's illegitimate child and supported Cheng Chongqiao instead. Lu Buwei and Xiao Pan will both be destroyed.

Lu Gong mused: "We must verify this issue before we can plan our next step. Just like we are not sure what is going on between you and Lu Buwei, so we petitioned to promote you as the Imperial Cavalry Commander to test Lu Buwei's reaction. Surprisingly, the test is very successful as Lu Buwei is the only man who objects your promotion."

Xiang Shaolong finally comprehends the complications of politics. When he first heard about it, he thought Lu Gong and the military are in favour of him. Now, he knows the real reason and motive.

Lu Gong shook his head and bitterly smiled: "Actually, only they themselves know what is going on and it is rather difficult to prove their relationship. Not impossible but difficult."

Xiang Shaolong had a big shock and asked: "Is there a way to test?" He was also puzzled that Lu Gong is discussing this with him. After all, isn't he close to Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan and may warn them beforehand?

Lu Gong mentioned: "We need Shaolong to help us with the testing."

Xiang Shaolong was staring at him in amazement when he recalled Zhu Ji's words and realised: "You want to conduct a blood test!"

Lu Gong seriously explained: “This is the only way to satisfy us. We shall put a drop of blood of each person into a silver bowl filled with a special chemical. It is a foolproof method.”

Abruptly, Xiang Shaolong’s thumping heart slowed down. As light as an astronaut in space, he nodded: “I will get the blood from Crown Prince. Lu Gong had better prepared a witness to see me drawing the blood personally from him. This way, there will be no tricks.”

It is Lu Gong’s turn to be amazed.

He looked for Xiang Shaolong as he is the closest to Zhu Ji after Lu Buwei. In addition, he is the one who personally saved them from Handan City. More or less, he should have an idea about the relationship between the three of them. If he hesitates about the blood test, Lu Gong will guess that something is amiss and know which Prince he will support.

Unexpectedly, Xiang Shaolong readily agreed and even wants him to provide a witness.

Both men were silent for a minute and Lu Gong decided: “Fine! I will get Lu Buwei’s blood. If the Crown Prince is Lu Buwei’s son, what will Shaolong do?”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “I am positive that the Crown Prince is the late king’s own flesh and blood. The test will prove everything.”

All of a sudden, his biggest headache has been resolved.

The blood test will ‘prove’ that they are not related and the Qin military will fully support Xiao Pan unlike now.

But with Zhu Ji’s support, Lu Buwei can continue to expand his influence and control the politics.

As Xiang Shaolong was wondering about the efficacy of this blood test method, he thought deeper and kicked himself for thinking too much. History has proven that Xiao Pan will be Qin Shi Huang.

Chapter 06

Before The Funeral

Xiang Shaolong returned to the Wu residence.

The fire that night only burned down a rice granary. The rest of the buildings are not affected.

Over the past ten days, two thousand of the elite family warriors entered Xianyang City separately, increasing their fighting prowess.

Riding Jifeng, he rode through the main gates with Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the Guardians. The air is filled with loud noises as the warriors are busy erecting sentry posts and other fortifications.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling great and jumped down his horse, wanting to inspect their work. Tao Fang came up and welcomed: "Lord Longyang is waiting for you in the main hall."

Teng Yi glanced at the huge courtyard in front of the residence and did not see any horse carriages or escorts. Puzzled, he asked: "He came alone?"

Tao Fang nodded.

Xiang Shaolong is excited to see him as well and know more about matters in Wei, including news about Zhao Ya. With Tao Fang, he entered the hall to see

Lord Longyang.

He did not put on a fake beard this time but was dressed as a commoner to keep a low profile.

Tao Fang left the two men alone and Lord Longyang happily exclaimed: "I am delighted to see Brother Xiang doing well."

Xiang Shaolong smiled: "From your tone, it seems that I should count my blessings to be able to stay alive."

Lord Longyang faintly sighed: "Countless people inside and outside of Qin are dying to kill you. There has been news that you are opposing Lu Buwei. With Lu Buwei's growing influence, even I am worried for you!"

Xiang Shaolong is already used to this drag queen's emotional outbursts. He bitterly smiled: "Paper cannot contain a fire. Nothing can be concealed from the world."

Lord Longyang was astounded and asked: "What is paper?"

Xiang Shaolong kicked himself, remembering that paper is only invented during the Han Dynasty. He lied: "It is my hometown dialect which refers to silk material."

Lord Longyang 'understood' and added: "I am here to pay my last respects to your late king. It is strange to have two kings die within four years. Everyone is heavily suspicious and Lu Buwei is really brave."

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is trying to trick him and sighed as well. Changing the topic, he asked: "How is Prince Xinling doing?" Lord Longyang coldly replied: "This traitor got his just desserts. I don't think he will ever recover his former glory. My spies reported that he is indulging in women and wine and even disband many of his family warriors. Under these circumstances, the King should not make things hard for him anymore."

He lowered his voice and revealed: "Zhao Ya is very sick!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and exclaimed: "What!?"

Lord Longyang sighed: "When she was sick, she kept calling your name. Prince Xinling was so furious he did not step into her bedroom at all."

Xiang Shaolong was grieved upon hearing this. How he wished he can grow two wings and fly to Daliang straight away.

Lord Longyang assured: "Brother Xiang can rest easy. I have petitioned the King and brought her into the palace and send the best physicians to take care of her. If Brother Xiang is willing, I can send her to Xianyang City but you must wait till she gets better."

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback: "She is so sick that she cannot travel?"

Lord Longyang intimately replied: "Lovesickness is the hardest to cure!"

Xiang Shaolong could not be bothered about the double meaning in his words. Impulsively, he declared: "No! I am going to Daliang to fetch her."

In a gentle voice, Lord Longyang advised: “Brother Xiang, do not let your emotions overwhelm logic. Xianyang City is now the battleground for all the strongmen of every state. If you leave like this and return to find your family annihilated, it will be too late for regrets.”

Xiang Shaolong was not fully convinced and insisted: “I will send someone to fetch her. Can Lord please send someone capable to come along as well?”

Lord Longyang agreed: “No problem. Prince Zhen has an excellent opinion of you. If he knows it is to help you, he will do his best. The King agreed to take care of Zhao Ya also because you rescued Prince Zhen.”

Xiang Shaolong put Zhao Ya’s issue aside and asked: “Except for Tian Dan, Li Yuan and General Pang, who are the other representatives?”

Lord Longyang disclosed: “Prince Dan represents the state of Yan and your old friend Han Chuang is here. Everyone is eager to collaborate with Lu Buwei and you better watch your back. They dare not do anything in Xianyang City but if Lu Buwei sends you out of Qin, there will be people trying to kill you.”

Xiang Shaolong was wondering if he should tell Lord Longyang that his assassins are led by Yan’s Xu Yi Luan when Lord Longyang continued: “Li Yuan brought Chu’s youngest Princess along and hoped to match-make her with Prince Zheng. Lu Buwei has agreed on his behalf but Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Du Bi are voicing strong objections. If the matchmaking fails, Lu Buwei’s prestige will be affected.”

Xiang Shaolong commented: “The success of the matchmaking depends on

the Empress's decision. However, Lu Buwei will use some devious method to make her agree with his suggestion."

Lord Longyang whispered: "I heard that the Empress favours you greatly. Why don't you sow discord and destroy Li Yuan's plans?"

Xiang Shaolong feared seeing Zhu Ji. If things go wrongly and they got together, he will have a guilty conscience and it also affects his standing and reputation. He sighed loudly: "It is because she favours me that it is difficult for me to say anything."

Lord Longyang knew his character and concluded: "I came here in secret and cannot stay too long. Tomorrow morning, I will send someone to look for you. His name is Ning Jia and he is my trusted subordinate. He is capable and smart. With him accompanying your man to Daliang, the trip will be a success."

Xiang Shaolong thanked him profusely and sent him out.

Coming back into the house, he held a discussion with Teng Yi and Tao Fang.

He originally wanted Jing Jun to fetch Zhao Ya but he needed all the men he can muster now. Finally, he got Wu Guo to fetch her with five hundred elite warriors.

In the middle of the conference, Qin Qing actually sent someone to find him.

The three men were caught by surprise. Has this pure and virtuous beauty

finally fallen in love?

By the time Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi, Jing Jun and the original Eighteen Guardians reached her place, it was nightfall, adding to the ambiguity of the situation. Everyone got seated at the simple main hall and two pretty maids begin to serve tea. Second Uncle Fang, the housekeeper, brought Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun into the inner hall.

Jing Jun was elated that his beauty treats him as an important guest while Xiang Shaolong is disappointed that this visit has nothing to do with their personal romance.

Men are like that. Even if they are not interested, they would not mind women falling in love with them as long as it is trouble-free.

Still in her mourning clothes, Qin Qing has a serious expression on her face. She greeted them and sat down in the host's seat.

Upon knowing that they have not taken their dinner, she instructed her maids to serve cakes to them and the Guardians.

Xiang Shaolong and his men did not hold back their appetites and munched on the cakes. The cakes are delicious and Jing Jun is full of praise for them.

Noticing her furrowed brows, Xiang Shaolong could not help but ask: "Why is Grand Tutor Qin looking for me?"

Qin Qing faintly sighed: "I may be thinking too much but something has

happened today that I don't feel good about."

The three men were shocked. Putting their cakes down, they stared at her.

Qin Qing is uncomfortable with three men staring straight at her, especially Jing Jun's shifty eyes. Lowering her head, she described: "I went to the royal temple today to change the flowers at the late king's altar. When I was about to leave, I was waylaid by Premier's guest-advisor Lao Ai."

The three men's expression grew heavy as well.

Jing Jun was incensed: "How daring! I must teach him a lesson. Who cares where is he from."

Teng Yi questioned: "Doesn't Grand Tutor Qin have any warriors escorting you?"

Qin Qing responded: "Not only do I have warriors escorting me; even the two Premiers are at the Royal Temple. When they heard my cries, they ran out."

Jing Jun coldly smiled: "Now Lu Buwei is in trouble!"

Teng Yi kicked him under the table.

Qin Qing faced Teng Yi and sincerely pleaded: "Brother Teng, please do not regard me as an outsider. Sister Yanran and I click very well. That's why I invited everyone here to discuss this."

Teng Yi was embarrassed and awkwardly agreed: “Sure! How did Lu Buwei handle this affair?”

Qin Qing’s expression became more serious and slowly described: “Lu Buwei did a good job. In front of Premier Xu and myself, he got Lao Ai to kowtow and apologise. He even publicly censured him.”

Xiang Shaolong could guess what is coming next as it is recorded in history. He sighed: “Did he proceed to send him into the palace to be a eunuch?”

Bewildered, Qin Qing asked: “How did you know?”

Teng Yi and Jing are even more fascinated. They have been with Xiang Shaolong the entire day. If there is anything he has seen or heard, they should have seen it or heard it as well.

Even if Philosopher Shi is reborn, he may not even guess that Lu Buwei is ‘punishing’ Lao Ai in such a manner.

Xiang Shaolong was in a fix, knowing that he has a slip of the tongue and revealed Heaven’s Secret. No matter how he tries to explain, no one will believe that he is that lucky.

Qin Qing had thought that Xiang Shaolong has spies in the palace who told him. But witnessing the look of amazement on the faces of Teng Yi and Jing Jun, she had a big shock and interrogated with disbelief: “Grand Tutor Xiang only made a guess?”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and pretended that it is nothing significant and sighed: "This is quite easy to predict. Lu Buwei's top priority is to get Empress Ji to support him fully. In Xianyang City, there is no one who knows her weakness better than him. Lao Ai is his strongest pawn. He will make Lao Ai a fake eunuch and let him enter the palace and seduce Empress Ji. In terms of scheming, we are way inferior compared to Lu Buwei."

Teng Yi and Jing Jun began to see some light but were still in awe about Xiang Shaolong god-like prediction.

Qin Qing stared viciously at Xiang Shaolong. After some time and still unconvinced, she commented: "I spend a long time thinking about this matter before I reach this conclusion. Before I could finish speaking, Grand Tutor Xiang knows everything as if he is also present as well. I think Grand Tutor's intelligence is sky-high and the inferior Lu Buwei is therefore jealous of you."

Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty and worried at the same time.

Zhu Ji and Lao Ai are like dry wood and fire. Nobody can stop it. What should he do next?

Jing Jun suggested: "Let me sneak into the palace and deliver a cut to him, making him a real eunuch."

Qin Qing cannot tolerate his coarse words and her face turned red. Displeased, she chided: "Brother Jing, we are talking about important issues!"

Teng Yi shot Jing Jun an angry look but Jing Jun is dissatisfied. Xiang Shaolong spoke coarsely too but this widow did not blame him. Xiang Shaolong knew that he has deceived them and relaxed. He was inspired and replied: “Grand Tutor Qin thinks too highly of me. It is a pity that nobody can stop them.

Qin Qing was taken aback: “But Empress always listens to Grand Tutor!”

In a frank and agonized manner, Xiang Shaolong replied: “The problem is that I cannot replace Lao Ai and thus, lose my advantage.”

Momentarily, Qin Qing does not understand his meaning. After realising, she lowered her head and bit her lip, pondering: “I understand but this is no small matter. Not only does it concern the reputation of the palace, it will allow Lu Buwei to be even more aggressive. Isn’t Grand Tutor Xiang worried at all?”

Xiang Shaolong earnestly suggested: “Why don’t Grand Tutor Qing head to Bashu and accompany Lady Hua Yang and lead a peaceful life?”

Qin Qing was shaken and stared at him. With mixed expressions on her face and lost for words, she finally lowered her head and dismissed in a low voice: “I have my own life and Grand Tutor need not worry. It is late! Thanks for coming!”

The three men did not anticipate her to end the discussion so abruptly and were disappointed. As they left, Qin Qing did not bother to see them off. The night wind is blowing strongly as they left her residence.

Teng Yi could not hold back and asked: “Third Brother is not going to expose Lao Ai and Lu Buwei’s scheme to Empress Ji?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “For Empress Zhu Ji, it is like fresh water after a drought. Who can resist?”

Jing Jun praised: “Fresh water after a drought. Lu Buwei is really good.”

As he held his horse, Teng Yi sighed deeply: “If Lao Ai manages to control Empress Ji, can we still survive in Xianyang City?”

Xiang Shaolong icily state: “Firstly, Empress Ji is not so easy to be controlled. If fact, we can make use of this to support Lao Ai and make him break away from Lu Buwei. When that happens, Lu Buwei will be in trouble, not us.”

Teng Yi and Jing Jun were awestruck while Xiang Shaolong has leapt onto Jifeng and rode ahead towards the long street.

In this moment, he is full of confidence when dealing with Lu Buwei.

Because no one can change history, including Lu Buwei.

So this evil man will pay the price for playing with fire.

No one can change history. The only problem is – he doesn’t know his own fate!

The next day, at dawn, Li Si led a huge group of palace guards and the

Imperial Edict to Wu Residence. Representing Xiao Pan, he officially appointed Xiang Shaolong as the General in charge of the Imperial Cavalry. Teng Yi and Jing Jun are appointed his assistant generals. They were presented with appointment letters, bows and arrows, official swords, army uniforms and emblems, as well as five hundred personal escorts. This shows that the King has been generous with them.

Xiang Shaolong is certain that this arrangement is planned by Li Si and is perfect. After receiving the Imperial Edict, Teng Yi personally selected five hundred men and got them to change into military uniforms. Together they rode towards the palace.

At the giant courtyard before the main palace, Xiao Pan has just finished the morning court session. With Zhu Ji by his side, he led both Premiers and his officials up an altar where he prayed to Heaven. The procession is impressive and majestic.

On this day, Xiang Shaolong and his men are exceedingly busy but joyful. He has to take over the Imperial Cavalry Command Centre east of the City and inspect his army. Later, he has to tie up the communication channels with the other ministries and even prepare for King Zhuangxiang's funeral tomorrow. The list is endless.

Fortunately, Xiang Shaolong enjoys support from the military leaders and Lu Buwei pretended to support him so everything went on smoothly.

Jing Jun is the grandest looking. Officially appointed at the assistant general of the Imperial Cavalry, he is in high spirits.

On the same day under Tao Fang's arrangement, Wu Guo and Lord Longyang's Ning Jia left for Daliang with five hundred elite warriors, determined to bring Zhao Ya back.

At night, Xiao Pan summoned Xiang Shaolong into the palace. Meeting him alone at the inner palace, he was infuriated: "Have you heard about Lao Ai?"

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "Empress is involved with him right?"

Anxious and angry, Xiao Pan cursed: "The late king has yet to be buried and Lu Buwei this traitor brought this gigo1o to be a fake eunuch and seduce Mother. I wish I can tear him to pieces."

Xiang Shaolong has to admit that Lao Ai has his way with women to seduce Zhu Ji in such a short time. Feeling bitter himself, he is disgusted with Zhu Ji for not monitoring her own behaviour. However, Zhu Ji has been lonely for some time and is a passionate woman. As a result, she cannot resist the seduction of Lao Ai the Casanova.

Xiao Pan is so mad he began to pace up and down the room. Xiang Shaolong could only accompany him in pacing.

All of a sudden, he stopped and stared at him furiously: "When I left Mother and you alone that day, I wanted you to comfort her. Of all the men in the world, I will only accept you being close to her."

Xiang Shaolong can only look back at him helplessly.

He understood Xiao Pan's thinking. Just like only he is good enough to be Lady Ni's lover in the past, Xiao Pan has regarded Zhu Ji as his mother and hoped that he will be Zhu Ji's lover as well. To a certain extent, he is Xiao Pan's ideal father.

Xiang Shaolong sighed: "If I do that, I will not be Xiang Shaolong."

Xiao Pan was astounded for a while. Then he nodded: "I understand. But now my heart is full of anger and hatred. I have this urge to barge into the back palace and give Lao Ai a heavy beating to vent my frustration."

Pausing, he continued: "Ai! What shall we do now? Before I am officially crowned King, everything must be approved by Mother. If Lu Buwei controls her, I will face further constraints. This afternoon, Mother summoned me and wanted me to replace the head of the palace guards An Gu with Lu Buwei's Guan Zhongxie. I violently objected and after quarrelling for two hours, she retracted her suggestion. She proposed to make Guan Zhongxie the Imperial Infantry Commander instead and I had to agree."

He sighed loudly: "What should I do?"

Scanning his child-like face, Xiang Shaolong explained: "This is your mother tricking you. She knew that you will never change An Gu and proposed an alternative so that you will consent at the end."

Xiao Pan was in a daze. Thinking hard, he confessed: "So this is how it is. I still cannot win her."

Xiang Shaolong comforted: “Do not lose hope. You are still young and love her deeply. That is why you lost to her. Come! Let’s sit down and think it over and see if we can counter Lu Buwei’s scheme.”

Like a deflated balloon, a crestfallen Xiao Pan returned to his seat on the sofa and turned his attention to Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong seriously asked: “How did Crown Prince know about Lao Ai?”

Xiao Pan angrily recounted: “Yesterday morning, Lu Buwei’s men brought Lao Ai into the palace. In front of Mother and I, he read out his crimes, saying he has just castrated him and ordered him to serve the palace as an eunuch. I am already suspicious because Lao Ai still looks full of life despite a recent castration. Only his face is slightly pale. Lu Buwei and Mother spoke in secret after that and Mother brought Lao Ai back to the Empress Palace. I felt that something is amiss and sent someone to investigate. They spent last night together.”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “What is so attractive about Lao Ai?”

Xiao Pan slammed the table and cursed: “D@mn gigo1o!” He added: “Honestly, he is tall, handsome and imposing with some heroic air, similar to you. His skin is much whiter; no wonder Mother was smitten the moment she saw him. Ai! What shall I do?”

This is the third time he said these words. Zhu Ji’s action has caused him to lose his bearings.

Xiang Shaolong came face to face with him and whispered: “Have you spoke to Li Si about this?”

Xiao Pan gave an agonized look: “Except for Master, I would not dare to tell anyone else. In fact, I have to keep it a secret for her.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed secretly. This is Xiao Pan’s dilemma. With everyone eyeing his position, he is dependent on Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji. Without them, this twelve year-old will be fighting a lone battle. Before he is crowned King, he must protect Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei and consolidate his power. It is a complicated affair.

Xiang Shaolong shifted his position and looked up at the main pillar support the room. He breathed deeply and offered: “There are two great plans that will help you avoid this present danger and be crowned in the future.”

Like a lost person who found the way home, Xiao Pan jumped for joy: “Master, tell me quickly!”

Xiang Shaolong watched him brightening up and was pleased. He explained: “First, we must win the support of the military. They are divided into four main groups. The most powerful tribe is central (Zhong Li) group and they are led by Lu Gong, Xu Xian and Wang Ling. They stand for righteousness and fairness. In a way, they are the most dangerous. If they turn against us, we will fight a losing battle. We can say that whichever side they choose, that side will benefit tremendously.”

Xiao Pan frowned: “I understand this. The other three groups are Lu Buwei,

Lord Gaoling and Cheng Chongqiao. How can we win the support of Lu Gong and his men?”

Xiang Shaolong almost wanted to laugh: “It is simple. You must prove to them who you are.”

He proceeded to tell him about Lu Gong and the blood test.

Xiao Pan was initially dumbfounded and exchanged a strange look with Xiang Shaolong. Simultaneously, they burst out in wild laughter, unable to believe such a ridiculous and funny experiment.

This future Qin Shi Huang was laughing so hard that his tears are flowing. Panting for air, he asked: “What is the other plan?”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly laughed: “That is to work with Lu Buwei.”

Xiao Pan was flabbergasted and exclaimed: “What!?”

Xiang Shaolong analyzed: “Lord Yangquan may be gone by Cheng Chongqiao still remains. There is also Lord Gaoling who is waiting patiently at the side. Both of them are serious contenders for the throne. If we focus on opposing Lu Buwei, both of us will be at a disadvantage and these two groups can seize the opportunity to attack us. They may even work together and force you to abdicate and that will be disastrous. If Lu Buwei still treats you as his son but Lu Gong and his men knows a different truth, you can control both sides and eliminate both contenders first. Then you will turn around and attack Lu Buwei. By then, no one will dare to oppose you.”

Xiao Pan slapped the table: “This is a good plan but Lu Buwei is a domineering man. If we allow him to do whatever he wants, he will end up with the most authority. If the military leaders are all his men, what can we do?”

Xiang Shaolong’s mouth curled up in a smile and simply state: “This is called ‘using your own weapon against yourself’. Not only will we not bother about your Mother, we will support Lao Ai.”

Xiao Pan thought he heard wrongly and exclaimed: “What?!”

Xiang Shaolong explained: “Lao Ai is a heartless and selfish man, always looking for benefits. If he sees the opportunity, he will leave Lu Buwei’s control. Since he knows the Premier residence well, he will get capable men to defect as well, weakening Lu Buwei. Your mother will support him and use him to counter Lu Buwei’s influence. While they are fighting, you will be the one reaping all the rewards.”

Pausing, he added: “Unless I am wrong, when your father is buried, Lao Ai will ask your mother for an official appointment. When that happens, you should know what to do!”

Xiao Pan is totally swept off his feet. At the end, he breathed in deeply and wondered: “Is there anyone in this world who is more scheming than Master?”

In this very moment, Xiang Shaolong knew that Xiao Pan has fully matured and is not a wilful child anymore.

Chapter 07

Deceitful Support

Before dawn, led by Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji, the royal family, every court official and the various representatives from the six states attended a grand but serious funeral procession. King Zhuangxiang's corpse is delivered from the Royal temple to the Royal Mausoleum for permanent burial.

Every single palace guard was activated to maintain law and order. Thousands of items were to be buried together with the coffin and the entire procession stretches over ten miles.

The citizens of Xianyang City put on mourning clothes and kneeled by the side of the streets, crying over the death of this benevolent ruler.

Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji cried heavily too. Everyone who heard them will be affected to cry as well.

Lu Buwei acted his part very well, expressing his deep sorrows and pain.

Xiang Shaolong, An Gu and Jian Sheng rode ahead and open up the roads for the procession. Jian Sheng is the current Imperial Infantry Commander as Guan Zhongxie is not officially appointed yet.

After Handan City's incident, this is the first time he saw Tian Dan, Li Yuan, Han Chuang and the rest. They paid attention to him but does not seem to

realise he is Dong Horse Fanatic.

General Pang is a steady man of average build with a square face and large ears. When their eyes meet, he can see the intelligence shining from his eyes. No wonder he can rise to such a post based on his words alone.

In his twenties, Prince Dan is the youngest among them. He is of medium build and has a jade complexion, making others trust him. But to Xiang Shaolong, it is a different matter altogether. Zhao Qian and the maids indirectly died under his hands. If he has the chance, he will not let him off.

Qin Qing was mingling among the royal family and the esteemed guests. Xiang Shaolong waved to her but she pretended not to see him.

Under the strict and sad atmosphere, the procession has travelled for several hours. They finally reached the mausoleum in the afternoon.

The Royal Mausoleum is divided into two parts, an exterior and an interior, forming a 回 formation. There is a northern gate, southern gate, eastern gate and western gate. With the typical Chinese arch at the four corners, the mausoleum is heavily guarded with an official in charge.

The way leading into the mausoleum is lined with burial items such as pottery, furniture, books and clothes. The most important people entered the inner part of the mausoleum and were seated in a resting area while attendants start to move the burial items into the burial chamber. When everything is settled, Lu Buwei went to the front and delivered a eulogy. At the end of the eulogy, the burial process begins.

Xiang Shaolong was grieved as he recalled King Zhuangxiang's generosity and hot tears begin to flow down his face

When the coffin is finally brought into the mausoleum, Zhu Ji fainted. Thinking about the past two nights she spent with Lao Ai, Xiang Shaolong still find it hard to forgive her.

To a certain extent. He could sympathise with her behaviour. First, she lost this man who has treated her so well and even made her the Empress of Qin. Secondly, she knew it was Lu Buwei who poisoned him but could not take revenge. In such a helpless scenario, she reacted irrationally.

Even with this understanding, he still feels uncomfortable with her situation.

Back at the Wu residence that night, he had insomnia. The moment he woke up, he got his men to fetch Ji Yanran and the other girls back to Xianyang City. He really needed them by his side. Teng Yi naturally wishes to have Shan Lan around too.

As long as he is the Imperial Cavalry Commander, Lu Buwei dared not attack him rashly.

Three days later, the population of Xianyang City removed all signs of mourning and everything resumed as per normal.

Xiao Pan had not attended his coronation yet but he is now the King of Qin.

Except for Xiang Shaolong and the farsighted Li Si, no one will expect this kid

to break centuries of deadlock and lead Qin to victory over the six states.

Back at the East Gate Command Centre, Xiang Shaolong was in a conference with Teng Yi and Jing Jun when Lu Gong came to find him.

Generals are the highest ranked positions in the military.

There are many different general ranking. Xiang Shaolong's Imperial Cavalry Commander is considered a lower ranked general and his army size is limited to fifty thousand men. But as he is considered half a City Commander, his status is slightly higher.

The highest ranked is Imperial General, which only Lu Gong ranks. Others like Wang Ling, Xu Xian, Meng Ao and Du Bi are only Great Generals. Thus, Lu Gong is considered the military chief.

Teng Yi and Jing Jun excused themselves while Lu Gong got seated at the chair of authority, smiling: "I came here to discuss something with you and to give you support as well. Now, everyone will know that I am behind you and will obey your command with question."

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly presented his thanks and appreciation.

Lu Gong's face became serious and revealed: "Are you aware that during the morning court session, Lu Buwei made another recommendation?"

Xiang Shaolong is not permitted to attend morning court yet. Frantically, he asked: "What are the changes?"

Lu Gong angrily detailed: “Lu Buwei made an exception and recommended a family warrior Guan Zhongxie to be the Imperial Infantry Commander instead of Lord Changping. Xu Xian and I objected strongly but were put down by Empress and Lu Buwei. Luckily, the Crown Prince got An Gu to guard Hangu Pass and made Lord Changping and his brother Lord Changwen the new leaders of the Palace guards, preventing a military protest. Hng! Lu Buwei is getting more and more out of hand! He keeps promoting outsiders as if Qin has no talented men!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed with relief, glad that Lu Gong has treated him as a Qin native.

He felt some regrets not having his buddy An Gu in the palace anymore. But Xiao Pan’s decision is the best given the circumstances. It must be Li Si who advised him to promote another person from the Qin military.

It will help to convince Lu Gong that Xiao Pan is not on the same side as Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji.

Lu Gong lowered his voice: “I have spoken to Xu Xian and Wang Ling. We have unanimously decided that the blood test is the best plan. Look!” From his bosom, he retrieved a special needle that has a sharp point but a wide base. He proudly explained: “This needle has a small opening. Once inserted into the flesh, blood will flow and accumulate at the base. When it pierces the skin, it is as painless as a mosquito bite and the bleeding will stop after it has been removed. If you are quick enough, the person being pierced may not even notice it.”

Xiang Shaolong received the needle from him and scrutinized it closely. Realising that it is probably the origin of acupuncture, he praised this invention and asked: "When do we act?"

Lu Gong explained: "According to our laws, ten days after the funeral, we must hold a hunting fair as a show of appreciation to everyone. The royal family, every official, the state representatives will all participate. Even those young men without official appointments will take part too."

As the Imperial Cavalry Commander, Xiang Shaolong naturally knew about this but did not expect it to be so grand. He was curious: "Is it very lively?"

Lu Gong bellowed: "Of course! Everyone is doing their best to display their talents and hope to be noticed by the new king. That year, I was talent-spotted by the late king during the hunt and nobody else received a bigger honour."

Xiang Shaolong was uncomfortable with the idea of killing animals blindly for pleasure and not for food. He will never stoop to such a level.

Lu Gong continued: "This is the best opportunity! I will draw Lu Buwei's blood while you get the Crown Prince's. Changping, Changwen and Xu Xian will be our witnesses. Hei! Only Shaolong is brave enough to draw the Crown Prince's blood. An Gu is a coward and he deserves to be posted out of Xianyang City."

Xiang Shaolong was highly amused. After going through the details of their plan, he sent him off respectfully.

Lu Gong's estimate is right on the spot. His rebellious subordinates underwent a huge attitude change and were more respectful than before, saving him and Teng Yi lots of time and effort.

In the evening, Zhu Ji summoned him to the palace.

Xiang Shaolong knew that it is inappropriate but still went ahead.

Zhu Ji looks calm and did not do anything extraordinary. She treated Xiang Shaolong warmly and expressed much concern. First, she enquired about his work as the Imperial Cavalry Commander and smiled: "I have warned Buwei that you belong to me. If you lose a single strand of hair, I will not let him off. Ai! The dead cannot come back to life. Will Shaolong see to your duties and do your best to protect Zheng'er, and leave everything else out of your consideration."

Xiang Shaolong understood where she is coming from. He secretly thought that this is her own wishful thinking and Lu Buwei is not an easy person to get along with.

At the same time, he can see the shift in Zhu Ji's attitude.

Unless she is happy with her present state of affairs, she will not want everything to stay the same forever.

He smiled: "I obey Empress's orders."

Zhu Ji wailed: "Don't give me that subordinate expression! I am able to speak

my mind only when I am with you.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “If I do not act befittingly our positions, there will be gossips.”

Zhu Ji was irritated: “There is nobody here and who cares about what they say! Who dares to offend me?”

Xiang Shaolong reminded: “Don’t forget about Lady Xiuli. We are meeting each other privately and if word gets out, Xianyang City will be gossiping about us.”

Zhu Ji smiled coquettishly: “You can relax. Cheng Chongqiao has been made Lord Changan and will leave with Lady Xiuli to Changan province tomorrow. Now, we do not have to run into each other in the palace. Everyone in the palace now belongs to me. See, I still have what it takes.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that this is probably to prevent news about Zhu Ji and Lao Ai leaking out instead but he cannot expose her now. He plainly state: “Empress definitely has what it takes.”

Zhu Ji was slighted stunned and stared at him with suspicions. In a gentle voice, she inquired: “This is the first time you are speaking to me like that. Are you unhappy that I am supporting Buwei? But everyone has their difficulties and must resort to doing certain things against their will. I am able to say this confidently because of what I went through in Handan City.”

Xiang Shaolong is not sure she is defending Lu Buwei or herself with Lao Ai.

After thinking, he replied: “Empress is right. I am feeling so helpless now.”

Zhu Ji slowly sighed and stood up.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly stood up, thinking that she is sending him off. This charming and mesmerizing beauty came face to face with him and looked deeply into his eyes. In an enchanting manner, she offered: “The Xiang Shaolong I loved the most is the heroic man I met at Handan City’s Hostage residence. Full of courage and fearless, allowing a weak woman like me to fully rely on without hesitation. Shaolong! Now that I am freed, why should we be bothered about all the unreasonable restrictions? Let’s rekindle our relationship.”

Watching her heaving chest, pretty face and smelling her scent, Xiang Shaolong nearly wanted to embrace her in his arms and make passionate love, forgetting about the world outside and indulge in pleasure between woman and man.

He will be lying if he says he is not aroused or have feelings for her.

But with King Zhuangxiang’s image still fresh in his mind, he resisted this temptation. When he was about to say something, heavy steps can be heard from beyond the door.

Both of them were shocked and hastily retreated a few steps from each other.

Incensed, Zhu Ji yelled: “Who is it?”

An attendant from the inner palace came in, knelt down and kowtowed: "Lao Ai is here to accompany Empress!"

Xiang Shaolong was stunned and looked over at this handsome man. Lao Ai happened to raise his head to face him as well. His eyes were filled with hatred and pain.

Scrutinising him carefully, Xiang Shaolong was secretly impressed.

In terms of looks, other handsome men like An Gu, Lian Jin, Qi Yu and Li Yuan are not too far off. But in terms of overall feeling, Lao Ai stands out.

His body is as sturdy as a hunting leopard, with every muscle toned. A perfect body coupled with skin as white as snow and hair as black as charcoal. He does look similar to himself.

But his most attractive part is his wild and playful side. With his eyes burning with passion and emotion, it makes whichever girl that conquers him feel an extreme sense of accomplishment.

No wonder Zhu Ji is seduced by him in such a short space of time.

Zhu Ji is apparently flustered at his interruption and is afraid of Xiang Shaolong knowing about their affair. Her face turning white, she scolded: "What are you doing here?"

Lao Ai lowered his head and calmly replied: "Subordinate knows that Empress does not have any attendant with her and came in to see if you have

any needs.”

Apparently, Zhu Ji has given him some privileges but Xiang Shaolong dare not mentioned it. Zhu Ji ordered: “Get out of here at once.”

If it was anybody else, he would have been executed on the spot.

Lao Ai is definitely here to vie with Xiang Shaolong for her attention, showing his hidden agenda. Since he knows that he has made her very happy in bed, he knows that Zhu Ji will not do anything to him.

He humbly and respectfully answered: “Empress, please don’t be angry. I am only trying my best to serve you.” He appears to disobey her order.

Zhu Ji was taken aback and peeped at Xiang Shaolong, howling: “Men!”

Two palace guards came into the room.

Xiang Shaolong knows that it is time for him to enter the picture. He held the two guards and helped Lao Ai up. Pleased, he commented: “This talented man is truly loyal to Empress. I like him the first time I see him. Empress must not blame him.”

Zhu Ji and Lao Ai were astounded at his words.

Xiang Shaolong was amused and continued to exaggerate: “I am a good judge of character and this man is a dragon among men. Let’s work hard together and do our best for Qin.”

Zhu Ji saw that the two guards are in a dilemma and stood there dazed, she shot: “Get out!”

The two men knew they had angered her and ran out in a flash.

Lao Ai has always regarded himself as a dragon among men but nobody has praised him about it before! His hostility towards Xiang Shaolong decreased greatly. In fact, it is Lu Buwei who gave him this mission to sow discord between Xiang Shaolong and Zhu Ji. Otherwise, he dare not barge in like this. Awkwardly, he replied: “Official Xiang is too kind.”

Zhu Ji was staring at Xiang Shaolong in a daze. Taking this opportunity, Xiang Shaolong bade her farewell.

Zhu Ji dared not hold him back. Instead, it was Lao Ai who sent him out of the palace.

At the palace exit, like an old friend, Xiang Shaolong offered: “Attendant, let’s work closely in the future.”

Lao Ai was embarrassed: “Official Xiang is too generous. I dare not accept your offer. After all, I am just an attendant.”

Xiang Shaolong pretended to be angry and promised: “With brother’s talent, why should you subject your will to others. This will not do! I will speak to the Crown Prince immediately and give you an official position. As long as Empress does not object, you will be promoted for sure.”

Lao Ai was muddle-headed by his support and asked with surprise: “Why is Official Xiang treating me so well? Hei! I am originally from Premier Residence. Official Xiang should have heard of me before. I am sent into the palace as a punishment.”

Xiang Shaolong feigned surprise: “You are from the Premier residence? No wonder I can see your talent the first time I set my eyes on you. Ai! What offence has Brother committed? Actually, it doesn’t matter to me. With your talent, Premier Lu will seek to restrict you. I am a man who keeps my promises and will take you to see Crown Prince at once. A talented man like you must be put to good use.”

Lao Ai was amazed but after consideration, he knew that Xiang Shaolong is telling the truth. Lu Buwei is a man who dislikes people who are more talented than him.

Presently, Lu Buwei is using him against Xiang Shaolong and Zhu Ji. In the future when Empress Ji is favouring him, Lu Buwei may seek to harm him.

If he can be on good terms with Xiang Shaolong and Crown Prince, it will help him in the future.

He happily nodded: “Many thanks for Official Xiang’s recommendation.” He became alarmed and asked: “Will Crown Prince be unwilling to see a mere attendant like me?”

His is ranked the lowest among all the people in the palace. Strictly speaking, he is just a toy for the Empress. No wonder he is having low self-esteem.

Xiang Shaolong nearly burst out laughing and dragged him along.

Back at the Wu Residence, Ji Yanran and the ladies have arrived. Even Wu Yingyuan came personally.

Wu Tingwei's execution has become a matter of the past.

Everyone knows that he has been promoted to be the Imperial Cavalry Commander and were jumping for joy.

Wu Yingyuan got his beloved son-in-law to the back garden for a private chat. He started: "Thanks to Shaolong, our family's reputation is growing day by day. In the past, applying for an exit permit takes almost two weeks; now, we get it on the spot. This is even better than our days in Handan City."

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly: "Father-in-law must be mentally prepared that Lu Buwei will become more powerful in the future and things will become more difficult for us."

Wu Yingyuan smiled: "By then, we'll be out of here. Wu Zhuo has sent word that he has discovered fertile land that stretches for thousands of miles. It is right beside Mount Huer Luan (?) and consists of grasslands and rivers. More importantly, there are no aggressive nomads nearby. With a few years of hard work laying the foundation, we can migrate there. I have decided to send another team of men there to start work. When we finally build our own state, our farms in Xianyang City will be insignificant."

Xiang Shaolong was happy for him and enquired about Mother-in-law. Wu

Yingyuan sighed: “She’ll be fine after a while. She will cry occasionally when she thinks about Tingwei.”

Xiang Shaolong do not know how to console him.

That night, Xiang Shaolong and his three alluring wives chatted by the candlelight, telling them everything that has happened over the past few days. When he mentioned Xiao Pan promoting Lao Ai to be an official, everyone was full of praise.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Like fish finding water, they made passionate love.

Out of the blue, Xiang Shaolong can feel that his entire year of bad luck is finally over. Currently, he is super confident in dealing with Lu Buwei.

Chapter 08

Jing Luo Canal

Xiang Shaolong, Teng Yi and Jing Jun have finally worked out the intricacies of Imperial Cavalry. Taking charge, they begin to improve the training and operations.

The Imperial Cavalry consists of ten thousand soldiers and are divided into five armies of two thousand men each. They are elite soldiers handpicked from the Qin army to protect the palace guards. The majority of the soldiers are descendants of the royal family and previous officials. With clean records and an attractive salary, everyone wishes to be part of them.

On normal days, The Imperial Cavalry will be based in Xianyang City's four strategic fortresses and are responsible for patrolling the city's external perimeter.

Issues within the city are the responsibilities of the Imperial Infantry. The two roles are very clearly defined.

If anything happens, the Imperial Infantry Commander is subjected to the Imperial Cavalry Commander's instructions. Between the two, the Cavalry Commander is the main Commander and the Infantry Commander is the assistant Commander. Every three months, they must practise their drills together to ensure that everyone knows their job well.

The Infantry Commander will report to the Cavalry Commander once a month and the Cavalry Commander will report to the King of Qin.

The Imperial Cavalry Commander is almost as good as the City Commander, receiving instructions directly from the King and must be a trusted and reliable person.

In the eyes of Zhu Ji and Xiao Pan, there is no one more suitable than Xiang Shaolong. Moreover, it was proposed by Lu Gong. Even with Lu Buwei's influence, he cannot prevent this from taking place. All he can do is to counter back by promoting Guan Zhongxue as the Infantry Commander.

The palace guards, imperial cavalry and imperial infantry formed the backbone of Xianyang City's defence.

Early in the morning, a promotion ceremony was being held at the palace courtyard.

An Gu was promoted to the rank of Great General and was commissioned to defend Hangu Pass, Hu Lao Pass and Yao Sai Pass. An Gu was delighted that his new post and rank were both higher than before.

His position is succeeded by Lord Changping Yinghou and Lord Changwen Yingyue, relatives of the royal family. One of them manages the palace cavalry and is made the Palace Cavalry Commander while the other manages the palace guards and chariots and is made the Palace Infantry Commander.

Using members of the royal family as leaders of the palace guards is a Qin

tradition and even Lu Buwei cannot break this custom.

Guan Zhongxie was promoted to be the Imperial Infantry Commander and Lu Xiong is assigned to be his assistant General.

The Infantry army may be secondary to the Cavalry army but they are in charge of city defences and enforcing law and order, similar to our modern police and civilian soldiers. The people of Qin are naturally violent and it is not easy to be a good Infantry Commander.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong met Guan Zhongxie.

As Tu Xian has described, this man is even taller than Xiang Shaolong but looks much uglier than his martial brother Lian Jin. However, he has a coarse face, wide shoulders, a thick neck, a thin waist and long legs. Guan Zhongxie is brimming with masculine prowess and makes people feel like he is a wild beast. He is around the age of thirty.

With thick eye brows, a high nose and deep eyes that sparkle like electricity, he strode in long strides up the platform to receive his military seal. Those officials that objected to his appointment were blown away by his aggressive aura. It is no mystery why he can stand out among all the talented men in the Premier Residence and become Lu Buwei's favourite.

Jing Jun got Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi to focus on Lu Buwei's guests, informing: "The fellow in yellow is the scheming Mo Ao and the two warriors behind him are Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen."

Both men quickly assessed them.

Mo Ao is a tall man with a long face like a horse. His skin is an unhealthy shade of green and is around the age of thirty five. He has a thick beard like a goat and looks like an educated man. His eyes are half-closed but looks energetic and unpredictable.

Xiang Shaolong inched towards Teng Yi's ear and whispered: "If we do not kill him, we will die under his scheming sooner or later."

Teng Yi nodded his head in full agreement.

Lu Chan and Zhou Zihen have a big difference in their heights but both men looked very calm and athletic. From their appearance, Xiang Shaolong can tell that they are very fearsome swordsmen.

Tian Dan and the other states representatives are not present as this is Qin's internal affair. Moreover, it concerns the safety of the city and outsiders are not permitted to participate.

Xiao Pan is from the royal family of Zhao and spent most of his time in the palace. For the two years he spent in Qin, he was tutored everyday in the ways of the royalty. Moreover, his actual age is two years older than the genuine Yingzheng. At the promotion ceremony, an important event witnessed by tens of thousands of soldiers and officials, he behaved appropriately and naturally, earning the praise of officials and men alike.

Lu Buwei was proud of his 'son' and felt that his effort had not gone to waste.

After the ceremony is over, the crowds begin to disperse. An Gu, Changping, Changwen, Guan Zhongxie and Xiang Shaolong stayed behind to have lunch with Empress and Crown Prince.

Right Premier Lu Buwei, Left Premier Xu Xian, Generals Lu Gong, Wang Ling, Du Bi, Meng Ao, Official Cai Ze, Left Marquis Wang Wan, Right Marquis Jia Gongcheng were all invited to join them.

This is something like a welcome feast for those who are promoted.

Lunch was held in the inner hall.

While waiting for the Empress and Crown Prince to change their clothes, everyone gathered around and begin to chat among themselves.

An Gu introduced brothers Lord Changping and Lord Changwen to Xiang Shaolong.

The two brother look quite similar with square faces and big ears. Tall and intelligent looking, they are around twenty years old.

It may be due to An Gu's influence that both men are very friendly towards Xiang Shaolong.

After some courtesy talk, Lord Changping Yinghou suggested: "Official Xiang's martial arts have reach the pinnacle and even Wang Jian lost to you. After the duel, he praised you to the skies. When you are free, you must come over to my place and teach my stubborn sister a lesson. That day, she bet that you

would lose to Wang Jian even before she sees you.”

Lord Changwen laughed: “Bring Talented Lady Ji along and let us widen our horizons too. But you must keep it a secret or all the men in Xianyang City will come to our residence and barricade the roads.”

An Gu interrupted: “Official Xiang must be careful when you fight with Lady Ying Ying. You must not underestimate her sword skills. She trashed me the last time we fought. Hei! This girl is almost eighteen and still does not want to get married. All the handsome lads in Xianyang City are getting impatient!”

He lowered his voice and added: “Beside Qin Qing, she is the prettiest lady in Xianyang City.”

Xiang Shaolong was alarmed to hear this. Since this is the case, he will not visit them and avoid getting tangled in another relationship.

Presently, he is treading on dangerous grounds with heavy responsibilities. The thought of skirt chasing is the lowest priority on his list!

When he was about to excuse himself, Lu Buwei came over with Guan Zhongxie, laughing: “Zhongxie! Let me introduce you to your colleagues!”

A flash of disdain shot passed the eyes of the four men before they greeted him.

As Lu Buwei introduced him, Guan Zhongxie was cordial and smiling. But when he faced Xiang Shaolong, a murderous look flashed past his eyes.

Xiang Shaolong was annoyed at his stare and was feeling absurd.

They have crossed swords before but have to hypocritically face each other with a smile on their faces.

Lu Buwei treated Xiang Shaolong as per normal and invited: "We must find one day and bring everyone to my place to chat and drink wine. Recently, the state of Yan gave me some top grade courtesans who are still virgins. If you like, you can bring two of them home. It is a joy to hear them sing and dance for you."

Who can resist the lure of beauty? The two brothers were tempted and gave their thanks.

An Gu maintained his stand and rejected: "I appreciate Premier Lu's goodwill but I am unavailable. In fact, I have to leave for the eastern border two days later."

Guan Zhongxie interrupted: "Why don't we hold it tonight while General An is still in Xianyang City? We can even hold it as a farewell feast for you."

Hearing him interrupt under such circumstances, Xiang Shaolong could guess his importance to Lu Buwei.

An Gu could not reject any longer and agreed.

Lu Buwei glanced at Xiang Shaolong and insisted: "Shaolong must come. Let it be your punishment for leaving without a word that day."

Xiang Shaolong helplessly agreed.

While Guan Zhongxie and the Lords are chatting, Lu Buwei pulled Xiang Shaolong aside and questioned in a low voice: "There have been rumours that we are on bad terms. Have you heard about such news?"

Xiang Shaolong cursed secretly but acted surprise: "Is it so? I have never heard of it."

Lu Buwei frowned: "Shaolong need not deceive me. After the last mission, I can feel your attitude changing. After thinking about it, I interviewed the Meng brothers in detail and realised that you have mistaken Lu Xiong's conspiring with Lord Yangquan, causing the death of Princess Qian. It is a misunderstanding. The person who betrays us is assistant general Qu Dou Qi, which is why he is on the run and dare not return to Xianyang City."

Xiang Shaolong was elated. At first, he did not anticipate Wu Tingwei to pass Ji Yanran's fake information to Lu Buwei so quickly. Unexpectedly, this kid is eager to produce results and spoke to Lu Buwei already.

He knew that if he believed him so easily, Lu Buwei will be suspicious. He wore a heavy expression and his face and asked: "Please forgive me for being frank. On the night the late king died, somebody bribed my family warrior to lead me out of the city to be ambushed. Fortunately, I discover his ruse and narrowly escape. Does Premier Lu know about this?"

Lu Buwei's expression turned serious: "Did you capture the traitor?"

Wu Tingwei's death is a Wu family secret. The public was only informed that he was sent out of Qin for business. Thus, Xiang Shaolong lied: "He said he was bribed by someone from Premier Residence and we killed him on the spot. After much difficulty, we managed to slip back to the farms."

Lu Buwei 'sincerely' suggested: "No wonder Shaolong has doubts about me. You are my confidante and I will not harm my own men. I will investigate this matter thoroughly. I am sure it is related to Du Bi. He whole-heartedly supports Cheng Chongqiao and is using this opportunity to sow discord between Empress, Crown Prince, you and me."

Xiang Shaolong is certain that his next target is Du Bi and Cheng Chongqiao. Therefore, he should be safe for the time being. However, things are unpredictable and he feigned surprise: "I did not think so far ahead."

The gong sounded at this instant, signalling the start of the banquet.

Lu Buwei hurriedly added: "The storm is over and so is the misunderstanding. Shaolong must cooperate with Guan Zhongxie and defend our city well. I have high expectations for you."

Xiang Shaolong agreed on the surface but was cursing Lu Buwei's ancestors secretly.

Everybody lunched in harmony.

Guan Zhongxie is very articulate and knows his boundaries. Most impressively, he is able to praise people indirectly without looking too

obvious. He is the kind of person you can curse when his back is turned but when chatting; you will never be bored by his words.

Lu Gong and the others have a good opinion of him but disliked him for ganging up with Lu Buwei.

Zhu Ji displayed her talent and expressed her appreciation to everyone, making those present delighted with her praises. Lu Buwei, Cai Ze and herself lead the interaction, adding plenty of excitement to the banquet.

Xiang Shaolong subtly noticed Left Marquis Wang Wan and Right Marquis Jia Gongcheng were supporting Lu Buwei, becoming his conspirators as well.

Of course they are with him, now that Lu Buwei is in power. If Lu Buwei is toppled, it will be a different story altogether.

Meng Ao may be defeated but he had conquered the three provinces of Sanchuan, Taiyuan and Shangdang, allowing the territory of Qin to expand greatly towards the east. An eastern base was built, scoring him a big merit. Thus, Lu Buwei is even more reliable with Meng Ao's accomplishments.

The ultimate defeat under Prince Xinling's combined army is forgivable. Anyone else in his position will be defeated too.

Among the three Tiger Generals of Qin, Wang Ling has been slowly won over by Lu Buwei and is on good terms with him. Now, he is not as friendly to Xiang Shaolong compared to Lu Gong and Xu Xian.

Only Du Bi is constantly bickering with Lu Buwei and state their differences clearly, not even giving face to Empress Ji and Crown Prince Zheng. As he is still a crucial military leader, Lu Buwei cannot do anything to him.

Cai Ze detailed: “Ever since Premier Lu enter politics, Qin has gained three provinces. Originally, we have ten provinces of Ba, Shu, Hanzhong, Shang, Beidi, Hedong, Longxi, Nan, Qianzhong and Nanyang. With Sanchuan, Taiyuan and Shangdang, we now thirteen provinces. It is a milestone for Qin’s prosperity. We have twelve million inhabitants, hundreds of thousands of soldiers, thousands of chariots, tens of thousands of horses. The six states may be strong or weak but none of them is as good as us.”

These words are to flatter Lu Buwei.

Lu Buwei was overjoyed to hear this but pretended to be humble and gave the credit to the late king and Xiao pan.

Everyone was lost for words as this is genuine truth.

Great General Du Bi frowned and faced Prince Zheng, asking: “Our country is improving by leaps and bounds. What future plans does Crown Prince have?”

Everyone frowned upon hearing his words.

He is only a thirteen year old.

If he was born as the Crown Prince, there will be tutors who will teach him how to govern a country from young. The problem is Xiao Pan ‘grew up as a

commoner' and has only been in Xianyang City for two years. As the present King but with limited experience, he will not give a satisfactory answer.

Du Bi obviously despise him and purposely put him on the spot.

Unexpectedly, Xiao Pan smiled and replied in his child-like voice: "In terms of prestige, there is no one better than one of our Qin's founding King, King Mu Gong. But even he cannot unite the world as Zhou De is still alive and feudal lords ruled the lands. After the reign of Xiao Gong, the states begin to fight among themselves, giving us an opportunity to take a break and build our country. As the days go by, our enemies become weaker as we grow stronger. Presently, there is once in a millennium opportunity to unite the world as long as the six states do not work together. Otherwise, even if the Yellow Emperor is reborn, he cannot unite the six states."

Everyone was flabbergasted as they did not expect this kid to have such extraordinary views.

Only Xiang Shaolong knew that it is Li Si's views. He was impressed that Xiao Pan can improve on it and say it out fluently.

Du Bi was dumbfounded and stared blankly at Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan's words have secured a foothold in the hearts of the officials.

Lu Buwei laughed: "The Crown Prince has great insight and my Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu have not been written in vain. Even when we have won, we must continue to work hard and govern the country with love. You must

never forget this.”

Not only did he grab the credit for himself, he acted like a father lecturing a son, making all those present frown deeply.

Zhu Ji smiled: “Zheng’er is still young and we must still depend on Premier Lu and everybody’s support.”

No one dare to rebut Lu Buwei after hearing her words.

Lu Buwei added: “Recently, I met a man from Han who knows how to dig canals. He recommended that we can open up a water channel between River Jing and River Luo. That will irrigate hundreds of thousands of hectares of fertile land. This suggestion will benefit our state tremendously. Will Empress and Crown Prince permit me to start work?”

The moment he heard this, Xiang Shaolong knew that Lu Buwei is trying to grab more power.

To dig a canal that stretches for hundreds of miles will take ten over years. It will also use up plenty of men and resources from Qin.

If this canal is to be dug, a significant amount of men and resources will be assigned to Lu Buwei since he is in charge. This will boost his authority accordingly.

Such an massive project should be brought up during morning court and have the various ministers analyzing its worthiness. Instead, he chose to bring it up

now. Cai Ze, Wang Wan and Jia Gongcheng are here to support him, proving that it has all been planned earlier.

Zhu Ji was pleased: “Since Premier Lu feels that this is beneficial to us, it must be so. Does anyone else have anything to add?”

Cai Ze and the two marquises voiced their support.

Before Xu Xian has a chance to say anything, Zhu Ji announced: “Premier Lu shall see to this. Once you have the plans, submit them to the Crown Prince to have a look. If there is no problem, you can start work immediately.”

With a few sentences, Lu Buwei’s authority has increased considerably.

Xiang Shaolong could only think of Mo Ao. Such an indirect power grabbing plan can only come from his wicked but ingenious brain.

Without killing him, it is hard to defeat Lu Buwei.

With Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei supporting each other mutually, not to mention the other officials, even Xiao Pan’s opinion was not consulted.

The only way to destroy this treacherous partnership is through Lao Ai.

Chapter 09

Conflict

In front of Li Si and Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan blew his top over Lu Buwei, cursing: “Why would I want to read his stupid Annals of Lu? He wrote so much about morals and virtues but he himself is an asshole. Tell me, Study Attendant Li, what is the logic behind his theory of ‘ruling by virtue, the world does not belong to one man but men belonged to the world’? Why don’t he get rid of me as well and rule Qin directly.”

Xiang Shaolong and Li Si glanced at each other, choked by the forceful scolding of Xiao Pan.

After lunch, Xiao Pan had summoned Xiang Shaolong into the study.

Zhu Ji spent most of her time with the newly-promoted Lao Ai and did not have much time for her growing child.

But Xiao Pan still loved this surrogate mother. He only cursed at Lu Buwei and did not say anything about her.

Li Si was frightened and kneeled down, kowtowing: “Crown Prince, please be appeased!”

Xiao Pan barked: “Get up and start explaining to me.”

Li Si stood up and respectfully begin: “Qin has been prospering for four generations and possess a strong army. The feudal lords are not righteous people. You must use the military to overcome them and govern the country with laws. The commoners will look up to the officials as an example. There is no other way.”

Xiao Pan calmed down and asked: “What about the Ruler’s principles?”

Li Si fluently replied: “I have been travelling all over the world and analyzed the politics of every state. It is pretty much the same everywhere. Firstly, it is the communication of the King’s orders. Power must be held in his hands and law must be used to govern the country, winning the support of the people and strengthening the country. Premier Lu’s ‘Govern the country with morality and righteousness’ is just plagiarising Confucius’s impractical ideas. It only sounds good but cannot work in real life.”

To Xiang Shaolong who came from the 21st century, Li Si’s theory is correct and managed to pinpoint the realities of life. The only issue is that the monarch is not subjected to the law like everyone else. Until two thousand years later, nothing much will change.

Since Xiao Pan came to Qin, he received the teachings of Shang Yang which emphasizes on power and military might. Moreover, he grew up in the palace of Zhao and knew the value of power. This will make him clash with Lu Buwei in the future.

Recently, he came into contact with Xiao Pan more frequently and found this kid to be developing his own set of thoughts. If there are people around him,

he will use gestures to highlight his authority. He is becoming more and more like the future Qin Shi Huang.

Xiao Pan appears to be fully satisfied with his answer and nodded: "From today onwards, Subject Li shall be my Palace Librarian and be responsible for all work related to books in the palace. You need to attend morning court every day."

Li Si was overjoyed and gave his thanks.

Xiang Shaolong was dazed and felt that Xiao Pan really have what it takes to rule Qin in the future.

Although everything in the palace has to be approved by Zhu Ji, she will not fall out with her son over a librarian. Moreover, her son has just promoted her secret lover.

Xiao Pan gestured: "I have something to discuss with Grand Tutor Xiang."

Li Si got the hint and took his leave.

Xiao Pan sat down and sighed: "You saw it for yourself how Empress and that traitor are singing the same tune. Even I do not have a chance to speak up."

Xiang Shaolong shook his head: "No! Crown Prince performed excellently and won the hearts of the officials. Now, the Crown Prince is only lacking in patience!"

Xiao Pan continue scolding: “Lu Buwei took all the credit for himself, wanting both power and fame. He may even want the throne!”

Pausing, he angrily added: “The Annals of Lu mentioned that we must punish evil men and not take bribes; we must give good men official positions. The good men is referring to himself. He is the one accepting bribes. And yet he says that the King must be frugal and lead by example.”

Although there is still a long time before his coronation, Xiao Pan’s dissatisfaction with Lu Buwei is growing every day. The moment he comes into power, Lu Buwei will be toppled for sure.

Xiao Pan asked: “Have you seen Li Si’s classmate, Han Fei’s work? He mentioned: Since Shang Yang’s reforms, Qin has become rich and strong but there is still evil at work. The people really getting wealthy are the ministers. He also mentioned: The Marquis of Rang crossed Han and Wei to attack Qi and did not even gain any territory after five years of war but was given a title. The Marquis of Ying attacked Han for eight years and was also given a title. Since then, everyone followed their example and start wars. If they win, they will be promoted; otherwise, they will be conferred a title. The King has no idea about all these treachery. What fascinating views he has! I cannot wait to meet him.”

Xiang Shaolong has not seen Han Fei’s work before and was impressed by his literature and brilliance. He curiously asked: “Is it Li Si who introduced them to Crown Prince?”

Xiao Pan shook his head: “It is Grand Tutor Qing who introduced them to

me.”

Xiang Shaolong thought that this is human nature. Li Si may be his good friend but he knows that he has a one-track mind and will not easily accept the teachings of others.

After a moment of reflection, Xiang Shaolong assured: “We have stirred up Lao Ai’s ambitions. If we can give him more benefits, I am confident that he will betray Lu Buwei and set up his own organization. When that happens, Empress will stand on his side and counter Lu Buwei. We will then reap benefits from their fighting.”

Xiao Pan sighed: “Is there anything else we can do? I did not want to approve the canal project or the majority of our men and resources will be under his control.”

Xiang Shaolong plainly state: “This strategy comes from a person named Mo Ao. Once this man is eliminated, Lu Buwei is as good as someone who has lost half his brain and will be easier to deal with.’

Xiao Pan cheered: “Master has finally decided to act?”

Xiang Shaolong’s eyes flashed with a strong killing aura and coldly promised: “Lu Buwei’s schemes originated from this man. He is considered my arch enemy and how can I not avenge Princess Qian’s death? I guarantee he will not survive the three day hunting fair!”

Xiang Shaolong was about to leave the Crown Prince palace when a sweet

voice called him from behind: “Grand Tutor Xiang!”

Xiang Shaolong was caught unaware and turned his head. A lively Qin Qing came into his sight.

She sauntered up to him and solemnly apologised: “My mistake. I should have addressed you as Imperial Cavalry Commander.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Your words are filled with sarcasm. Are you still grudging me for saying the wrong things that night?”

Qin Qing was stunned at his forthrightness. Her alarmed expression is enchanting and even Xiang Shaolong who is used to seeing pretty women feasted his eyes on her beauty.

However, her attitude remains the same and coldly replied: “Not really. Grand Tutor’s words are right. Men are like that, always thinking that they are right and everyone else should listen to them.”

Xiang Shaolong was amazed at her angry words. But since it was her who approached him, he should have a chance to maintain a certain degree of relationship with her.

He raised his hands in mock surrender: “I give up and I throw in the towel. Grand Tutor Qin please forgive my incompetency and foolish behaviour.”

Originally, Qin Qing successfully maintained her cold demeanour but now, like the sun after the storm, she lowered her head smiling and wailed: “You

are incorrigible.”

Heavens! If she gives him this hot-and-cold treatment continuously, he may cross his own line and fall in love with her.

Luckily, Qin Qing resumed her coolness and lightly sighed: “I cannot forgive you because you did not expose Lu Buwei’s scheme to Empress. But after thinking, I find it reasonable. Everyone is trying their best to get into Lu Buwei’s good books and even you are not an exception.”

Xiang Shaolong felt that he was severely misunderstood.

But he cannot rebut her.

How can he tell her that he cannot change the path of history and thus, will not support Lu Buwei as Lu Buwei will be the ultimate loser at the end?

While he was lost for words, Qin Qing added with disdain: “I felt bad for Sister Yanran to have married a husband who panders to those in power.”

She turned and left.

Watching her graceful, swan-like posture moving away from his, he roared: “Hold it!”

The nearby palace guards were alarmed and looked in their direction. They saw the respected Grand Tutor of Crown Prince Zheng, Xianyang City’s number one beauty Qin Qing on one side and the Imperial Cavalry

Commander Xiang Shaolong on the other side. Helplessly, they pretended not to have heard or seen anything and returned back to their original duties.

Qin Qing casually halted and coldly snorted: “Are you going to arrest me? Now, you are in power and enjoy the backing of several influential people. Naturally, you will not see eye to eye with me.”

Xiang Shaolong nearly exploded. Striding to her back, he angrily exclaimed: “You!”

Qin Qing simply asked: “Are you trying to create a scene in front of the entire palace?”

Xiang Shaolong composed himself and discouraging hissed: “Forget it! You can think whatever you like! I know what I am doing.”

Qin Qing softly asked: “Aren’t you just a lackey of Lu Buwei?”

Xiang Shaolong felt terrible to be misunderstood by this beauty and shot out without thinking: “I wish I can grab hold of him and... Hei! It’s nothing.”

Qin Qing turned around and was pleased: “Now you are telling the truth. But why did Mister Xiang did not expose Lu Buwei’s scheme to seduce Empress?”

Xiang Shaolong realised that she acted in such a manner to force him to reveal his true self and was dumbfounded. He stared blankly at her attractive face which only Ji Yanran can match.

For once, Qin Qing did not mind him appreciating her looks. Revealing two rows of neat and snowy white teeth, she smiled: "Please forgive me for tricking you. But you are such a chauvinist man and always keep secrets from women, especially me. What did you say to King Zhuangxiang on his deathbed?"

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and bend forward towards her, admiring her flawless skin, her petite ear and her novel earring. In a hushed voice, he disclosed: "I promise His Majesty that I will kill Lu Buwei one day to avenge him and told him to leave peacefully."

Hot tears flowed continuously from Qin Qing's eyes.

Through her vision blurred by tears, she saw Xiang Shaolong walking away from her.

To keep his dinner appointment at the Premier Residence, Xiang Shaolong quickly left the palace and rushed home to shower and change.

Naturally, the Tian sisters were tending to him

Music from Ji Yanran's playing of the flute can be heard from the rear garden. The tune was sad and full of pain. Yanran played for a while, stopped, resumed playing and stopped again.

Xiang Shaolong was finding it strange and proceeded to the rear garden to see his pretty wife.

Ji Yanran was seated in the garden pavilion and holding her flute. Something seems to be on her mind.

Xiang Shaolong went up behind her and stretched his hands in front, embracing her into his bosom. Kissing her delicate face and smelling her scent, he implored: "Why is Yanran's music so melancholic?"

Ji Yanran slowly explained: "Today is the anniversary of our country's annihilation. Thinking that our grand empire is gone just like that, I cannot help but be distracted. People fight and countries fight. When will everyone see eye to eye with each other?"

Xiang Shaolong went for her lips and kissed her heavily, sighing: "This will never change. Everyone is out to benefit themselves and it doesn't matter if it is one man, an organization, a tribe or a country. As long as greed and benefits are present, fighting is unavoidable. For example, there is only one Talented Lady Ji whom I have gotten. Other people will not have a share of you and will fight with me for you."

Ji Yanran was greatly amused and hugged him in return, shaking her head in amazement.

Xiang Shaolong asked: "Did you have an afternoon nap? When I first saw you in Daliang, you just woke up from your nap and your fragrance is overwhelming."

Ji Yanran was happy with his teasing and giggled: "Nonsense. Hubby seems to be in a good mood today."

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “Don’t even ask. I was tricked by your good friend Qin Qing and nearly blew my top.”

Ji Yanran was surprised: “Are you sure? She is a proud woman but still has a good opinion about you. Based on our friendship, she should not give you any trouble!”

Hugging her, Xiang Shaolong lead her to another side of the pavilion. After they got seated, he told her the whole story.

Ji Yanran was laughing non-stop like a blossoming flower. Even though he is familiar with her looks, her charming posture aroused him and he began to fondle her.

Ji Yanran held his naughty hands and wailed: “Stop tempting me. You are going to the Premier Residence for dinner soon.”

Xiang Shaolong was reminded and stopped immediately. Curious, he asked: “How did Qin Qing become a widow? Do you know about her background and history?”

Ji Yanran softly sighed: “Sister Qin is a royal descendant and her forte is in academic. At the age of sixteen, she married a capable general according to her parents’ wishes. Sadly, on the day of their wedding, her husband received a military order to enter war at once. He did not return.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “Such a pitiful girl!”

Ji Yanran objected: “I don’t think she is pitiful. Sister Qin knows how to enjoy life and loves to trim plants. Once, I saw her spend an entire day trimming a pot of peonies. I cannot be like her and entertain myself and be lost in my own world. Unless it is with you Xiang Shaolong!”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “I have just heard the best flattery in the world. But you are right. Qin Qing an elegant and virtuous lady who is as calm as the moon.”

Ji Yanran laughed: “But her peaceful composure has been shaken by you. It is said that she never talks about men but she kept asking me about things related to you. When I told her about you, her eyes are shining with excitement. Hng! I did not pick the wrong person to marry.”

Xiang Shaolong was dazed: “You are telling me all her secrets; are you trying to encourage me?”

Ji Yanran seriously state: “On the contrary. Sister Qin is special and commands the highest respect from all Qin women, like a goddess of chastity. Unless you can bring her away from here, you will create endless trouble for you and for her if you violate her purity.”

Xiang Shaolong was awe-struck and promised: “Relax! After the unfortunate incident of Princess Qian and the maids, I have given up skirt-chasing. Except for my wives and maids, I have no other desires.”

Ji Yanran straightened up and repeated: “Given up skirt-chasing. Ai! Why does hubby’s casual words always enlighten me and taught me something

new?”

Xiang Shaolong was feeling guilty. He managed to woo this top beauty and shake the resolution of the pure Qin Qing because he has two thousand years of history backing him up.

This is his trump card in betting his life against Lu Buwei's. Otherwise, he would have been killed a long time ago.

At this very moment, Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi came home with Xiang Bao'er whom they had brought out to play. Xiang Shaolong accompanied them for a while until evening time. He then made his way to the Imperial Cavalry Command Centre to meet up with Teng Yi and Jing Jun. Together, they rode towards the Premier Residence for Lu Buwei's banquet.

Chapter 10

Premier Residence Banquet

Arriving at the Premier Residence, Master Tu Xian is waiting to welcome them.

This old friend whispered a secret meeting time and place to them before getting his men to bring them into the Eastern Hall where the banquet is being held.

He was the last to arrive. Lord Changping, Lord Changwen and An Gu were there before him. Unexpectedly, Tian Dan and Li Yuan were present as well. Tian Dan's General Dan Chu is also present.

As a host, Lu Buwei introduced the three of them to Tian Dan and the rest.

Xiang Shaolong recognized Tian Dan but pretended to meet him for the first time. Tian Dan is scrutinizing him carefully but did not display any recognition. However, this devious man masks his thoughts well. Even if he spots something wrong, he will not express it on his face.

Lu Buwei continued to introduce them to the other guests from the Premier Residence. Guan Zhongxie, Lu Xiong are definitely joining them for the banquet. The others are Mo Ao, Lu Chan, Zhou Zihen and his other clansmen.

Mo Ao is a quiet man with little words, keeping a low profile. If not for Tu

Xian's warning, nobody will know that this man is Lu Buwei's chief strategist.

Li Yuan is looking great and was quite friendly and polite towards Xiang Shaolong. From his facial expressions, he did not show any signs of jealousy about losing Ji Yanran to him.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking about Guo Xiu'er who married him. Is he treating her well?

Love can be the biggest mental burden.

The three allied states of Han, Zhao and Wei were not invited to this banquet, showing that Lu Buwei supports only the friendship between Qin, Qi and Chu. Since this is the case, Yan should be invited as well. It is possible that Yan has caused the death of Princess Qian and Lu Buwei did not invite them on purpose so as not to make things difficult for Xiang Shaolong.

Everyone got seated.

Just by looking at the seating arrangements, Xiang Shaolong can tell that it has been thought over carefully.

The banquet is held in the large hall with people seated on two side rows. Tian Dan and Li Yuan were seated at the first seat of the two rows. Lu Buwei himself was seated beside Tian Dan while An Gu is accompanying Li Yuan. Following them were Xiang Shaolong seated with Guan Zhongxie; The Changping brothers with Dan Chu and Lu Xiong, followed by Teng Yi, Jing Jun accompanied by Tu Xian and Mo Ao, etc.

Tian Dan started: "If this banquet is held ten days later, it will be surely held at the new Premier Residence."

Lu Buwei laughed gleefully at his remark.

Until now, Xiang Shaolong does not know how these two men are related but he can guess that there are some dealings going on between them.

Otherwise, why didn't Qi send their forces to join Prince Xinling's combined army?

Or it could be Li Si's deduction that Qi is only good at boasting and lack real military prowess.

Li Yuan comes from Chu which took part in fighting against Lu Buwei's General Meng Ao but was still well-received by Lu Buwei. Thankfully, Xiang Shaolong knew what is going on and was not surprise at all.

At the end of the day, the most influential man in Chu is Lord Chunshen. He may indulge in women and wine but is someone who looks at the big picture and is on good terms with Prince Xinling. He will definitely support Prince Xinling by sending the Chu army to join his combined army.

To execute his plan to ally with Qi and Chu while attacking the three allied states (Han, Zhao & Wei). Lu Buwei has to do his best to win Li Yuan to his side. If Li Yuan can topple Lord Chunshen and gain military control, he can attack the eastern states in peace without fearing intervention from Qi and Chu.

Tian Dan is not easily tricked so there must be a secret agreement between Lu Buwei and him.

This is what politics is all about.

Secret arrangements can have a far greater effect than the results of a fierce battle.

To Xiang Shaolong who knows the eventual winner of the Warring States Period, Tian Dan and Li Yuan are making unwise decisions.

But to the people who existed during these times, the future is unpredictable.

Warlords and heroes have fought countless battles for centuries, making everyone believe that this will go on forever.

Qi and Chu had hoped to reap rewards from the fighting between Qin and the allied states.

Tian Dan leaned towards Lu Buwei and whispered to him. From their expressions, there is something going between them.

While waiting for the dishes to be served, everyone began chatting among themselves.

Xiang Shaolong did not want to speak to Guan Zhongxie but the next table is a few feet away from them. He knew that conversation is going to be

unavoidable.

Guan Zhongxie began: “Official Xiang’s swordsmanship is famed throughout Qin and I value martial arts more than my life. We must find one day and exchange pointers.”

Xiang Shaolong could guess that his words sound nice but he is actually trying to beat him in a duel and gain fame for himself.

But he is a real expert after all. His posture, footsteps and balance reveals everything about his real fighting talent. Among all the men he can duel before including Yuan Zong, Teng Yi and Wang Jian, this man should be the most formidable.

If his arm strength is stronger than Xiao Weimou, Xiang Shaolong is likely to lose unless he resorts to some extraordinary fighting techniques.

He beat Lian Jin as he applied the correct strategy and his Mohist sword is much heavier, thereby forcing Lian Jin to be out of breath and dying a tragic death.

This method will not work on Guan Zhongxie.

He smiled: “Official Guan may not know about our rules yet. The King has decreed that military officials are forbidden to duel among themselves.”

Guan Zhongxie was startled and weakly replied: “Official Xiang is mistaken. How would I dare to duel against you; I am only suggesting we examine each

other's swordplay!"

Xiang Shaolong officially state: "I see. I have misunderstood you."

Guan Zhongxie cheerfully added: "I heard that the Crown Prince loves sword fighting. Premier Lu is concerned that Official Xiang may be too occupied and wanted me to teach the Crown Prince but forgot that I am very busy myself. Premier Lu may be a brilliant man but he makes some small errors as well!"

Xiang Shaolong was caught by surprise.

Lu Buwei's attacks come one after another like waves upon the shore.

Firstly, he used Lao Ai to tie Zhu Ji down and now he is trying to use Guan Zhongxie to isolate Xiang Shaolong from the royal family altogether.

Lu Buwei did not know their secret and thought that Xiao Pan favours Xiang Shaolong because children love to worship heroes. If Guan Zhongxie can defeat Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan will lose interest in him.

He could forecast Lu Buwei arranging a duel between them in front of Xiao Pan. When Xiao Pan personally witnesses his defeat, Guan Zhongxie will likely replace him in tutoring Xiao Pan.

If Mo Ao is the originator of this scheme, then this man is simply horrendous.

Unconsciously, he looked towards Mo Ao and saw him chatting joyfully with Jing Jun. He is worried that Jing Jun may reveal some secrets unknowingly

and prayed hard that Jing Jun is cleverer than he looks.

A series of gongs can be heard approaching the hall.

A group of ten odd musicians came in from the left and began playing.

Everyone stopped talking and enjoyed their performance.

This is the first time Xiang Shaolong saw musicians at dinner banquets since he came to Qin. This is a common sight in the six states but rare in Qin. It appears that Lu Buwei is becoming more and more reckless and even started this culture in Qin.

As everyone is waiting with anticipation, a group of nearly thirty courtesans danced lightly like butterflies into the hall. Full of liveliness and beauty, they gathered at the centre of the hall and began performing according to the music.

These Yan ladies were of average built and dressed in bright flowery colours, showing their excellent curves and astonishing skin. With their gentle expressions and pleasant singing, everyone present was intoxicated by their presence.

Lord Changping and Lord Changwen are hot-blooded young men and were dazed at the sight before them. Remembering Lu Buwei's promise to give them some of the courtesans, they stared hard and try to memorise who are the prettier ones.

Xiang Shaolong hated this practice of using women as gifts. He frowned in silence.

Guan Zhongxie suddenly came to his ear and whispered: "Like you, I hate to see decent women who are treated like slaves. The only thing I can do for them is to keep them in my own room and treat them well!"

Xiang Shaolong was completely blown away and cannot imagine these humane words coming from him. His impression of him greatly improved.

After the dance has ended, the Yan girls divide themselves into two groups and greeted the guests.

The hall was filled with thunderous applause.

They did not take their leave and lined up neatly to be assessed by the men.

Lu Buwei chortled: "People say that the ladies from Yue are the prettiest. Having travelled all around the world, I must say that the ladies of Yan are not inferior too."

The Yan ladies must be virgins as Lu Buwei had mentioned because every one of them became embarrassed immediately.

Tian Dan the expert remarked: "The Qi lady is passionate; the Chu lady knows her fashion; the Yan lady is gentle; the Zhao lady is charming; the Wei lady is elegant, the Han lady has the best figure. This is my frank assessment after personally trying and after discussing with other men."

Lord Changping objected: “Why is there no assessment of the Qin lady?”

Li Yuan joked: “The Qin lady is known for her stubbornness and Chancellor Tian is a guest and dared not say it! But having seen Qin Qing’s excessive beauty, I think the ladies of Qin and Yue are the prettiest of all. Who can match the beauty of Official Xiang’s wife and the widow Qin Qing?” Finishing, hints of jealousy can be seen on his face.

Guan Zhongxie interrupted: “No wonder Lord Changping has such strong objections. I heard that Lord’s sister is an expert swordswoman and her looks are as good as her sword. If it was me, I will speak out for my sister as well.”

Lord Changping smiled bitterly: “A Qin lady like her is indeed stubborn. My brother and I have suffered greatly under her hands.”

The moment he said these words, everyone at the banquet roared out with laughter.

Xiang Shaolong is reassessing Guan Zhongxie, thinking that this man is more capable than he had imagined. He is very articulate and knows how to win the hearts of others. Compared to Xiao Weimou who only knows how to fight and Lian Jin who is so cocky, he is way better than them. As a result, Lu Buwei has chosen him to counter himself.

Lu Buwei laughed until he choked: “Prince Dan’s generous gift consists of one hundred Yan ladies. After careful selection, I have handpicked the best twenty eight for all of you. You can choose with your eyes blindfolded and still end up with a good catch. After the banquet, I will send them to each of

your residences. The Yan ladies, you are dismissed.”

The ladies kneeled down and bade farewell before taking their leave.

Lord Changping and the rest finally regained their composure.

Lu Buwei is an easy going man and is very generous to those he is keen to bribe. It is no mystery why his power is growing everyday and he even dared to poison King Zhuangxiang.

After three rounds of drinking, the musicians begin to play again.

Everyone was astounded and did not know what program is coming up next.

Out of a sudden, a cloud of red flew into the hall. Among the flashing swords, a delicate and charming belle was seen. With a sword in each hand, she displayed many enchanting yet difficult sword poses, causing those present to be deeply fascinated.

She was dressed in a yellow and white warrior suit but had a large red cloak on. Awe-inspiring and imposing, she gained everyone’s attention in the shortest amount of time.

The cloak was moving quickly like a ball of fire, making her strong fighting spirit even more mesmerizing and captivating.

Her swords flashed relentlessly from her toned arms and were full of life and energy. Even Xiang Shaolong was dazed by her performance.

Guan Zhongxie has an intoxicated look on his face and he watched without blinking.

Using her sword to protect her body, she leapt forward and somersaulted several times, earning loud cheers from the crowd. Her swords flashing again, she suddenly moved towards Xiang Shaolong's and Guan Zhongxie's table.

As everyone is watching with a mixture of fear and amazement, her two swords shot out towards them.

Both men did not make a single move nor did they blink once, allowing the swords to brush past their noses.

The young lady stared fiercely at Xiang Shaolong for a quick second before she kept her swords, saluted and left like the wind.

Xiang Shaolong and Guan Zhongxie exchanged a smile as both of them started to become more suspicious towards each other.

Everyone looked at Lu Buwei and wanted to know who is this pretty lass who can use the sword so well.

Lu Buwei merrily mentioned: "If I have to give this girl away, the receiver will have to be my son-in-law."

Xiang Shaolong recalled the angry look on her face and instantly knew who she is.

She is the Lu Buwei's third daughter Lu Niang Rong whom he refused to marry.

After the banquet, Lu Buwei had already sent three Yan courtesans to Wu residence.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi had a quick conference and informed Jing Jun: "Little Jun can choose one of them and must treat her well and not as a slave."

Jing Jun was caught by surprise and nodded in agreement. Before Xiang Shaolong finished speaking, he had slipped out to choose a woman.

Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi faced each other and smiled bitterly. They thought of Lord Changping and Lord Changwen at the same time. With Lu Buwei's bribery, they will switch sides to support him sooner or later.

To Pu Bu and Liu Chao waiting beside them, Xiang Shaolong instructed: "The other two girls shall belong the two of you. They are helpless ladies and I want you to take care of them for life and give them happiness."

Liu Chao and Pu Bu were surprised as well to gain rare Yan beauties. Originally, they should serve Xiang Shaolong and his wives and it will be long before they get such opportunities. But Xiang Shaolong is a unique master who is fair and generous. Both men are deeply grateful for the gifts.

After settling the girls, Xiang Shaolong and Teng Yi sat down for a chat.

Teng Yi began: “Guan Zhongxie is a worthy opponent. He will soon gain the respect of the Qin military who worships heroes. Compared to the six states, the people of Qin are more innocent and are easier to deceive.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “From my point of view, I know that he has evil intentions but admired him at the same time. We have finally met our match.”

Teng Yi added: “Mo Ao is the dangerous one and kept a low profile. Without Tu Xian’s reminder, we will never know that he is such a significant character in the Premier Residence. This kind of hidden enemy is the most frightful. You must not forget your appointment with Tu Xian tomorrow at Phoenix Bridge. I am sure he has some news for us.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded to his head to show that he has remembered and state in a deep voice: “We must plan to kill Mo Ao during the hunting fair.”

Teng Yi frowned: “Are you sure he will be present?”

Xiang Shaolong affirmed: “This is the best time to network with Xianyang City’s royal family as well as the high ranking officials. Lu Buwei will need him around to assess his opponents and he will be there for sure. Our biggest advantage is that Mo Ao does not know that we are aware about his devious schemes.”

Teng Yi detailed: “Leave this to me. We will begin by examining and analyzing the western wilderness intimately. The people of Jing village are second to none in the forest. As long as we can get Mo Ao to be alone for a short while,

we can make it look like he has been bitten by a poisonous snake. Lu Buwei can only blame Heaven for his death.”

Xiang Shaolong was delighted: “We shall do as Second Brother advised.”

Teng Yi had a hurt look on his face: “I feel really guilty about Princess Qian and the maids. As long as I can do something for them, I will sleep better at night.”

They head back to their bedrooms.

Wu Tingfang and the other wives are still awake and waiting for him to come back. Nursed by a nanny, Xiang Bao’er had fallen asleep already.

Xiang Shaolong had been working the whole day and was exhausted. As Tian Zhen and Tian Feng assisted him in changing, Ji Yanran asked in a low voice: “Sister Qin wishes to see you. Can you try to visit her tomorrow? She also hopes that me, Tingfang and Zhi Zhi can stay at her place for a few days.”

Xiang Shaolong shrugged his shoulders” “As long as all of you are agreeable, why not? But I am not sure if I have any free time tomorrow.”

Ji Yanran assured: “Just do your best!”

On the other side, Wu Tingfang commented: “Look! Sister Yanran is in such high spirits today!”

Xiang Shaolong was curious: “What has happened?”

An ecstatic Zhao Zhi replied: “Her godfather sent her an intricate five-string qin (musical instrument) shaped like a banana. Sister Yanran is over the moon!”

Xiang Shaolong was pleased: “Is there news about Mister Zou?”

Ji Yanran blissfully state: “Godfather went to Bashu and visited Lady Hua Yang. He found the scenery to be picturesque and stayed there to focus on his <<Teachings of the Five Morals>>. Based on his intellect, it will be a great piece of work.”

Wu Tingfang smiled: “When will our Talented Lady write her own book?”

Ji Yanran shot her a look: “I did have that intention but once I met my nemesis Xiang Shaolong, I discovered that my knowledge compared to his was like comparing the glow of the firefly to the glow of the moon. Thus, I gave up that idea! He should be the one who should write a book!”

Xiang Shaolong was guilt-ridden and he led his pretty wives to bed.

That night, he dreamed that he was in the heavenly Bashu and even Qin Qing is with him. Together, they led a peaceful existence without a care in the world.

The dream turned into a nightmare where he saw Zhao Ya who is so sick until she did not look like a human anymore. When he woke up with his body full of sweat, he found out that the sun is already high up in the sky.

Chapter 11

Each Having Their Own Plots

When Ji Yanran and the ladies set off to Qin Qing's residence, Xiang Shaolong removed Bloodwave, the sword that has never left his side and changed into commoner's clothes. Under the discreet protection of the family warriors, he slipped out of Wu residence and made his way to Phoenix Bridge north of Xianyang City to keep his appointment with Tu Xian.

Since he arrived at Handan City, he has always been mixing with the royalty and upper class. In Xianyang City, he is leading an even more prestigious lifestyle which is very different from the commoner's way of life. Whenever he wants to do anything, there is someone at his beck and call. Now, he has regained some freedom and has transformed into a common man, enjoying the interesting lifestyle of the man in the street.

He intentionally squeezed his way into the busy business streets and observed the stalls selling various vegetables, goods and art pieces.

Regardless if it is made of steel, bronze, porcelain, wood, leather, cloth or sculptures, everything for sale has an ancient feeling which is not seen in the modern 21st century.

He could not resist buying a few toys to present to his wives and maids to make them happy.

The market is crowded with people and most of them are females. Noticing Xiang Shaolong's sturdy built and handsome looks, they disregard other men and cast their gazes at him frequently.

The young girl selling the bracelet to him kept staring at him with love in her eyes and was smiling sweetly like a blossoming flower.

Xiang Shaolong found it very unique. If it was him years ago when he first came to the ancient times, he would seduce the prettiest girl back home to his bed.

The ladies of Qin are open-minded and straightforward, unlike those in the south-eastern states.

Xiang Shaolong hardened his heart and ignored the young girl's loving gaze. When he turned around, the crowd was becoming chaotic. It seems like several thugs are chasing a young man and are trying to hit him. On the other side, a girl who appears to be his sister or wife is crying as she tries to stop the attackers but was pushed down to the floor instead.

The young man has strong endurance. Despite being overwhelmed, he did not succumb to their attacks and gritted his teeth and continued fighting.

One of the thugs picked up a pole from a stall nearby and was about to hit the young man on his head. Xiang Shaolong leapt in front of the young man and pushed the fiercest thug back a few steps. Spreading his hands, he called: "That's enough! This matter shall end here and no one is allowed to fight anymore. If someone dies, who is accountable?"

The lady took this chance to rush up to the badly bruised young man and cried: “Hubby Zhou! Are you ok?”

Xiang Shaolong realised that this is a young couple and took pity on them.

The group of thugs are rascals who have been terrorizing the common folks. Even though they have caused several stalls to collapse, no one dare to say anything or even blame them for it. Seeing that someone has come to challenge them, they were infuriated and cannot let Xiang Shaolong off. They observed Xiang Shaolong is extremely brave and heroic looking and dared not underestimate him. Picking up poles and other makeshift weapons, they surrounded Xiang Shaolong.

The leader of the thugs roared: “Who are you? You look like a newcomer and probably has not heard of us, the Ten Tigers of Xianyang. If you know what is good for you, you better kneel down, kowtow to us and admit your mistake or we will give you a good trashing.”

Xiang Shaolong rudely stared at him and couldn’t be bothered. He turned back to the young couple and smiled: “Is little brother ok?”

Before the young man could answer him, his wife shrieked: “Be careful!”

Xiang Shaolong let out another smile and flipped to one side, snatching the pole that was about to hit his head. At the same time, his leg kicked out into the private region of his attacker.

The thug gave a loud and tragic cry and released his pole. He was sent flying

by another kick from Xiang Shaolong and cannot get up anymore.

Grabbing another pole with his other hand, Xiang Shaolong took up a fighting stance and attacked two men simultaneously with his two poles on two sides. He aimed for their ears and fell both men in one stroke. The ear is the human body's most fragile part and their agony is written all over their faces.

The other thugs were scared stiff and dared not attack him. Picking up their fallen comrades, they slipped away quickly into the crowd.

The onlookers clapped loudly to show their appreciation.

Xiang Shaolong has an appointment to keep and cannot stay around for too long. From his bosom, he retrieved enough silver to buy several horses and pushed them into the hands of the young man and sincerely advised: "Find a physician to treat your injuries and leave quickly before those men come back!"

The young man firmly rejected: "I did not do anything to deserve this money. Mister has helped me greatly and how can I receive your kindness once again?"

His wife nodded her head vigorously, showing her strong approval of her husband's decision.

Xiang Shaolong is secretly joyful and gently asked: "If it was me that was in trouble and you are wealthy. Would you have done the same thing?"

The young man named Zhou replied: "Of course!"

Xiang Shaolong laughed: "So be it!" Stuffing the silver into his hands, he left laughing.

Among the cheering of the crowd, he hurriedly left the market. Just as he was about to cross a wide street, someone called him from behind: "Mister, please hold your step!"

Xiang Shaolong turned around in surprise and saw a stocky man approaching him. This man is neatly dressed with a long sword at his waist and appears to be a family warrior. The man invited: "Mister's action has been witnessed by my Young Mistress who happened to be passing by. She admires your character and wishes to meet you."

Xiang Shaolong was very amused but looking at his fine bearing, he must have come from a prestigious family. He politely rejected: "I am a born wanderer and aspires to fly everywhere like the wild geese. Please tell your mistress that I am grateful for her appreciation."

Finishing, he left.

The family warrior repeated 'fly everywhere like the wild geese', the refreshing new proverb a few times before he left dejectedly.

Tu Xian led Xiang Shaolong to a simple and inconspicuous hut near the bridge and declared: "I have specially arranged this place for our rendezvous. If we have to meet up in future, this will be the place!"

Xiang Shaolong knew that he is very experienced and will make this safe house undetected by Lu Buwei and his cronies. He sat down and inquired: "How is Lu Buwei treating Brother Tu?"

Tu Xian plainly state: "There are many things he still needs my help. Especially those that he wishes to keep confidential. For example, it was me who extorted the bunch of Yan courtesans from Prince Dan. Originally, Prince Dan wanted to give them to the influential people in Xianyang City as bribes but Lu Buwei learnt about this. He hinted to me and got me to be the bad person and extort these girls. I even have to pretend that this issue has nothing to do with him. Isn't it hilarious?"

Xiang Shaolong is slightly amused and felt less hatred for this man. He recollected that he will send assassins after Xiao Pan in the future. The assassination will fail and his state will be annihilated. He will eventually become another pitiful soul.

Of course! Prince Dan can never guess that his future is so tragic.

Tu Xian voice sounded in his ear: "There is news of Yuetan!"

Xiang Shaolong is rejuvenated by this news and happily asked: "Where is Brother Xiao now?"

Tu Xian disclosed: "He has changed his identity and is currently an attendant in Han's Lord Nan Liang's residence. I have sent someone to give him fifty taels of gold. Han is not a good place to stay for long."

Xiang Shaolong agreed: “If Qin wants to attack the east, the first point of contention is Changping and Han will be in great danger with their minimum resistance.”

Tu Xian smiled: “Han may be weak but still have some tricks up their sleeves. You should know about this man called Zhengguo. This man is not as simple as he looks.”

For a while, Xiang Shaolong did not know who he was talking about. He suddenly remembered Zhengguo is the water engineer from Han who is trying to build a canal linking River Jing and River Luo, irrigating the land between them. Startled, he asked: “Is there a problem?”

Tu Xian explained: “I have met this man and he is very gifted. The King of Han treats him very well and his loyalty to Han is without question. When he came to Lu Buwei with his plan, I thought that he is here to assassinate him and purposely did not remind that traitor. Amazingly, the fella really has a grand plan to build the canal and knows every single process. Mo Ao knew that this will increase Lu Buwei’s influence and encouraged him. Thus, Zhengguo’s canal plan is born.” Xiang Shaolong still did not comprehend: “Since this is the case, Lu Buwei will only stand to benefit without any losses.”

Tu Xian analyzed: “This may be beneficial to Lu Buwei and Qin but is bad for any eastern campaign. Such a canal will need several years and millions of manpower to build. With this burden, Qin will not have any more resources to conquer the east. The most they can conquer is a few plots of land around Changping! Zhengguo’s strategy is indeed top-notch!”

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened. Although he is from the elite special commando unit, he is not someone who wants to look for trouble. All these infighting before Xiao Pan's coronation may not be a bad thing after all!

He nodded: "So Master Tu summoned me here is to update me on these two issues."

Tu Xian seriously commented: "Of course it is not over such small matters. Lu Buwei has plotted to kill you during the hunting fair. Wu Tingwei's disappearance has raised his suspicions. He knows that you and him are irreconcilable like fire and water, and can never work together again. Unless you marry Lu Niang Rong as a form of submission, Lu Buwei will not allow you, his scourge, to remain alive. There is no one who knows how capable you are other than him."

Xiang Shaolong had a narrow escape. When Lu Buwei spoke so politely to him yesterday, cleared up their misunderstanding and even gave him Yan courtesans is to make him lessen his guard and not take any precautions against him. He was nearly tricked!

He bitterly laughed: "What a coincidence! I planned to kill Mo Ao during the hunting fair too."

Tu Xian smiled: "I knew you will not bend to his will. Shaolong is right on target. If you get rid of this man, it is as good as breaking one of Lu Buwei's limbs."

Xiang Shaolong was curious: "How did Brother Tu come to know these

secrets?”

Tu Xian proudly boasts: “There are still many tasks that have to go through my men. They would never guess that I know the truth behind the red pine forest attack and that I have been serving them loyally over such a long time but is now working with outsiders. With my additional information, I can easily see through their schemes.”

Xiang Shaolong nodded: “If we can know how they are trying to kill me, I can turn the tables on them.”

Tu Xian shook his head: “This matter is planned by Mo Ao and Guan Zhongxie and I do not have the details. Guan Zhongxie is desperate to kill you. First, he can replace you and secondly, he did not want his dream girl Lu Niang Rong to marry you. If he can become Lu Buwei’s son-in-law, his reputation will grow drastically.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed: “He is trying too hard. You should have seen the hatred in her eyes last night.”

Tu Xian laughed: “Women are strange creatures. Initially, she did not want to marry you. When you rejected the marriage proposal, she begins to notice you. Whether is it love, hatred or spite, she has a different attitude towards you. She was the one who suggested the swordplay performance to Lu Buwei. I believe she wants to show you how enthralling she is and make you regret your decision.”

Xiang Shaolong did not know whether to laugh or cry, sighing: “I will rather

kill myself than to marry my arch-enemy's daughter."

Tu Xian smiled: "Lu Niang Rong is apple of Lu Buwei's eyes. If Crown Prince Zheng is really not his son, he would have arranged for their marriage."

Glancing at Xiang Shaolong's questioning gaze, Tu Xian shrugged his shoulders: "Don't ask me who the real father of Crown Prince is. I think even Zhu Ji does not know. When she got pregnant, she was sleeping with both of them."

Xiang Shaolong laughed secretly. In the whole world, only he, Teng Yi and Wu Tingfang knew Xiao Pan's real identity.

The moment Xiang Shaolong stepped into the Cavalry Command Centre, he received word that the Crown Prince wishes to see him. He rushed to the palace immediately. Dressed in long robes of the King of Qin, Xiao Pan is having a secret discussion with Li Si in the study room.

Seeing him, Xiao Pan mentioned: "General's words have a great effect on Lao Ai. This morning, Empress told me that this man is a rare talent and should be utilised well, asking me to give him a promotion. Needless to say, Empress is besotted with him and must reward him for his efforts."

Xiang Shaolong sighed to himself, knowing that Zhu Ji has degenerated to the point of no return.

But he could not bear to blame her. This beauty has always been grateful towards her benefactors or she will not tolerate Lu Buwei's evil acts. King

Zhuangxiang's death is a heavy blow to her, making her a traumatized and confused woman. She has lost her usual sanity and felt that life is empty. Moreover, she has been rejected by him. Under such circumstances, Lao Ai the Casanova is able to make use of this opening to win her affections.

She needs the pleasure of the flesh to compensate for her sufferings!

Xiao Pan sighed: "This fellow is so impatient. After a few days as an attendant, he is already asking for a promotion. Li Si and I were discussing what official post to give him!"

Finishing, his mouth curled up in a smile.

Li Si who has become Xiao Pan's confidante suggested: "From my point of view, we can give him such a high post that it will incur Lu Buwei's jealousy. If we can make Lu Buwei object to this promotion, it will be even better. That will strengthen Lao Ai's determination to break away from Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong finally managed to sit down and laughed: "I am afraid even with the cleverest people guessing, they can never guess that we are discussing such nonsense with the Crown Prince. Hei! Is there any post that will be in open conflict with Lu Buwei or one of Lu Buwei's cronies?"

Li Si had a brainwave: "Why don't we promote him to be the Inner Custodian? This post is related to the Imperial Cavalry and Imperial Infantry. Documents from the Imperial Cavalry and Infantry must be vetted by the Inner Custodian before it can be submitted to the King. This is a position of authority and is almost like a supervisor of the Imperial Army."

Xiao Pan frowned: "But this post is occupied by Teng Sheng. This man has shown real ability and is respected by the military. If we displace him, the generals may protest."

Li Si suggested: "Crown Prince can promote him to another higher post to reassure the military."

Xiao Pan thought deeper and remarked: "The most important post in the palace is the Commander of the Palace Guards which is held by Lord Changping and Lord Changwen. Below them is Subject Li who is the Imperial Librarian who is in charge of all documentation. The next in power will be the Inner Custodian. The remaining positions are those concerning the hunting fair, the ceremonial officials, the banquet officials but these positions are ranked much lower. I cannot think of an ideal position that will satisfy Teng Sheng."

Xiang Shaolong did not say anything as he is completely ignorant about palace rankings.

But after he has heard all their discussions, he remembered Justice Bao and had a brainwave: "Since there is an Inner Custodian, there should be an Outer Custodian as well! This new official shall be the eyes and ears of Palace and be responsible for gathering information outside the palace. If there are any suspicious activities, he must report it to Crown Prince immediately. This is a challenging and refreshing job which should make Teng Sheng happy and excited."

Xiao Pan slapped the armrest exclaiming: "Great idea! The Empress will

support this idea and Lu Buwei cannot intervene. But I do hope he will still voice out his objections.”

Li Si praised: “Official Xiang is creative and thinks out of the box. I am impressed.”

Xiang Shaolong added: “It will be good to give Lao Ai an office in the palace. He can use the office to plan his schemes and hold meetings for his cronies. Soon, he will be Lu Buwei’s opponent.”

Xiao Pan joked: “Let’s find a place opposite the new Premier Residence, since they are going to be opponents, their residences should be opposing each other too.”

Everyone roared out in laughter.

Lu Buwei will be burnt for playing with fire. He wanted to use Lao Ai to control Zhu Ji but now, Zhu Ji has ‘switched sides’ and cultivated a new adversary against him.

An attendant came to report that Grand Tutor Qin is here and is waiting outside.

Xiao Pan’s face shone with happiness and instructed Li Si and the attendant to leave first. When they have left, he stood up and confided in Xiang Shaolong: “I don’t know why but after His Majesty has passed away, I especially love to see Grand Tutor Qin. Watching her calm expression and peaceful demeanour, I feel extremely comfortable, even with her occasional

scolding. In the past, I never had this feeling before.”

He added softly: “Except for Master and Grand Tutor Qin, nobody dares to scold me. The late king and Empress never scold me.”

Xiang Shaolong could not hold back and hugged him tightly, sighing: “Dear Child! It is because you needed a respectable motherly figure like Lady Ni.”

Xiao Pan trembled strongly and his eyes reddened, leaning into Xiang Shaolong’s bosom like a little boy hiding in his father’s protective arms.

Xiang Shaolong understood his behaviour. Ever since he became Yingzheng, this poor orphan began to treat King Zhuangxiang and Zhu Ji like his natural parents, especially doting on Zhu Ji. With King Zhuangxiang’s death, his beautiful dream is shattered.

Zhu Ji is a realistic woman who will not fall out with Lu Buwei over King Zhuangxiang’s death. With Lao Ai entering the picture, Xiao Pan knows that Zhu Ji can never replace his stern but righteous birth mother Lady Ni.

And Qin Qing has unconsciously become the closest idea of being his mother.

Xiang Shaolong is also saddened about Zhao Ni. In a low voice, he instructed: “When you have regained your composure, go out at once for your lesson.”

Xiao Pan forcefully nodded his head.

Xiang Shaolong released him and left.

Chapter 12

Heartbroken Over A Silk Painting

Passing through the corridor, he came to the outer hall and saw Qin Qing's beautiful figure standing right in front of the window. She is staring at the garden beyond the window and seems to be thinking about something.

Xiang Shaolong could not resist going up to her back and softly asked: "A penny for your thoughts?"

Qin Qing must have predicted that he will past by and wasn't surprised at all. She did not turn around but plainly state: "Is Grand Tutor Xiang interested to find out?"

Based on these words, Xiang Shaolong affirms that she has feelings for him as these words have crossed the line on an ordinary conversation. Moreover, she is someone who is not into relationships, making it even more striking.

Xiang Shaolong is stunned and wanted to cower back but he likes her special attention towards him. Summoning his courage, he answered: "Hei! If I am not interested, I would not have asked in the first place."

Qin Qing turned her slender frame around and her icy face is just an arm's length away from Xiang Shaolong's own face. Her eyes shining sharply, she simply remarked: "I am thinking, if Official Xiang knows that I am here, would he take a detour and avoid me?"

Xiang Shaolong could not take it anymore and dryly laughed: “Grand Tutor is thinking too much. Oh! Have you seen Yanran and the rest?”

This strong-willed woman refused to back down and scolded: “Don’t change the subject. The people I hate the most are the traitors who bring harm to the King. The other types of people I also hate are those who have a high opinion about themselves, pretending to protect women but actually regard women like us to be nothing more than goods. Have I wronged you?”

Xiang Shaolong had a taste of her temper before and bitterly laughed: “It seems that I am not any better than Lu Buwei. Ai! I have apologised to you already and only made a mistake by advising you to accompany Lady Hua Yang in Bashu! Until now, you are still unwilling to let me off?”

Due to Xiang Shaolong, Qin Qing may have cultivated a new habit, which is to maintain her icy expression but wanted to laugh out at the same time. Finally, she gave up and burst into giggles and her cold expression began to thaw. She viciously shot him a look and declared: “Yes! I am dissatisfied. And I will never forgive you!”

This is the first time she is flirting with him. Xiang Shaolong’s heart warmed up and was about to retort when footsteps were heard.

Both of them knew that the Crown Prince has arrived and quickly parted.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly bade her farewell but Qin Qing’s teasing expression has been engraved into his heart forever.

Under the protection of the Eighteen Guardians, Xiang Shaolong rode towards the outer palace. Coincidentally, he ran into Lord Changping who is deploying the palace guards guarding the palace gates. Lord Changping pulled him aside and whispered: "The Yan ladies are really something!"

Xiang Shaolong could only mumble a reply.

Lord Changping is young and curious, asking: "Premier Lu's third daughter is delicate-looking and well-skilled with the sword. When I woke up this morning, her performance is still fresh in my memory. Hei! How is she related to you? Why did she test your reaction with that stance?"

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely intimate, as if he is chatting with his army buddies in the 21st century. Their conversations will be filled with women, fighting and curses at the instructors. He smiled: "I think that this is called a large tree attracts the most wind!"

Lord Changping chortled: "Well said. Your newly created proverb suits you very well. My stubborn sister has come to know about our friendship and demanded that we bring you home to meet her."

Xiang Shaolong can feel a headache coming: "Can we talk about this later? You know that I have many things to attend to."

Lord Changping smiled: "You cannot escape from her grasp. Just show her a few strokes and make her happy on account of our friendship. Otherwise, she will give you a hard time during the hunting fair."

Xiang Shaolong was startled: “She is taking part as well?”

Lord Changping replied: “It is her big day! She will lead her female army in a grand and imposing parade.”

Xiang Shaolong was swept off his feet, exclaiming: “Female army!”

Lord Changping sighed: “It is an army of aggressive ladies just like my sister. Normally, they will look for expert swordsmen to compete their sword fighting skills. Even Wang Jian is terrified of them. Personally, I think this is the main reason he slipped off to guard the Northern Border. If not for the fact that you are at the farms most of the time, you will not be spared too.”

Xiang Shaolong finally understood and burst out in guffaws. Lord Changping added: “An Gu is leaving tomorrow to guard the eastern Passes. We have always been on good terms and will organize a farewell dinner tonight. Why don’t you come along too and humour sister Ying Ying?”

Xiang Shaolong has always like Lord Changping for he does not put on any airs and is easy to get along with. Moreover, it is An Gu’s farewell dinner. He consented immediately.

Lord Changping is pleased and left him.

Back at the Command Centre, he was detained by Jing Jun. Jing Jun excitedly reported: “There are three things! Ah!” He yawned.

Xiang Shaolong stared at him, asking: “You have been busy the whole night?”

Jing Jun nonchalantly replied: “As Third Brother instructed, I spent half a night chatting and coaxing her and the other half indulging her. That’s why I am so tired.”

Xiang Shaolong was tongue tied and did not know how to advise him. Embarrassed, he asked: “What are the three things?”

Awkwardly, Jing Jun began: “First, the three sister-in-laws mentioned that if you can afford the time, please join them for lunch at Qin Qing’s residence. Xiang Bao’er misses you too. I would suggest you spend the night there with them.”

Xiang Shaolong glared at him: “Little Jun, why are you such a busybody today?”

Jing Jun modestly answered: “I will not have the guts. But I noticed that Third Brother has been smiling more and could not help but pay more attention to you.” Finishing, his eyes became red and he lowered his head.

Xiang Shaolong can feel the deep brotherly love that exists between them. Hugging him by his shoulder, he kept quiet.

It may be due to King Zhuangxiang’s death that he gathered his courage and fighting spirit, pushing the sad memories of Zhao Qian’s and the maids’ deaths out of his daily thoughts.

After all, everything happened more than a year ago.

Jing Jun reported: “The other two matters are Lord Longyang is waiting for you in the main hall and Tian Dan have sent someone to summon you urgently to his guesthouse.”

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled.

Why is Tian Dan looking for him?

Based on his wide network of spies, he should know about Lu Buwei’s enmity with himself. If he wants to stay in Lu Buwei’s good books, he should avoid him instead.

Thinking about this, his heart began to beat wildly.

After he sat down with Lord Longyang in a resting room, Lord Longyang congratulated: “My heartiest congratulations to Brother Xiang for being promoted to be the powerful Imperial Cavalry Commander.”

His face darkened and he added: “Thinking that we have to face each other in the battlefield one day, I am really filled with dread. Why is life filled with so many things beyond our control?”

Xiang Shaolong sincerely state: “Relax! I will do my best to avoid such a situation from happening. In these turbulent times, even parents fight their children and brothers fight among themselves. Lord must be more open-minded.”

Lord Longyang emotionally commented: “Back in the past at Daliang, we

were as irreconcilable as water and fire. Now, Shaolong is my true and best friend. I will be leaving tomorrow and we may never meet again. I am tormented and agonized at such a separation.”

Xiang Shaolong was stunned: “Lord is not participating in the hunting fair?”

Lord Longyang’s eyes shone with a murderous look. Unhappily, he replied: “Lu Buwei is openly working with Qi and Chu against the allied states. Why would I spend more time here and receive more cold treatment? I am not so foolish.”

Xiang Shaolong knew this is the truth as well and did not bother to pacify him. He recollected Zhengguo’s canal project and disclosed: “Lord need not worry for the time being. For the next eight to ten years, Qin will be unable to mount an eastern campaign. As long as everyone continues to work together, this should be a peaceful period. At the most, you will lose small pieces of territory!”

Lord Longyang’s eyes shone sharply and inquired: “What makes Shaolong say so?”

Xiang Shaolong sighed and told him everything about Zhengguo Canal.

Lord Longyang was extremely moved: “Shaolong actually told me such a big secret. I will keep it confidential even from my King to show my gratitude.”

He realised: “No wonder Han Chuang is so confident and flamboyant. I was worried till I cannot eat or drink but he is partying and visiting the courtesans

every night. So this is the reason.”

He lowered his voice: “Why don’t Shaolong remind the Crown Prince and score a big merit. It will also underscore Lu Buwei’s influence.”

Xiang Shaolong bitterly smiled: “I do not want Qin to attack Daliang so quickly!”

Lord Longyang was deep in thoughts for a while and added: “There is something I initially did not want to tell you but I am touched by your kindness and will feel guilty if I continue to hide it from you.”

He gritted his teeth, disclosing: “Han Jing (Zhao’s Empress Jing) that bitch does not look at the big picture and I need not help her keep this secret.”

Xiang Shaolong was astonished: “What is it?”

Lord Longyang replied in a deep voice: “You have met Pang Nuan (Junyu). He is the spokesman and confidante of Han Jing. Not only is he a devious schemer, he is very articulate as well. This time, he came to Qin with ulterior motives. Recently, he has been in constant contact with Lord Gaoling Yinghou. You should know better than me that something is afoot!”

Lord Gaoling is the prince who was overridden by King Zhuangxiang to be the new King of Qin. All along, he has been dissatisfied and has the intention to rebel. Unexpectedly, he is in cahoots with Zhao.

Xiang Shaolong understood that since Lord Longyang knew about Han’s

scheming and put aside his worry about Qin's attack, the next person he hated is Zhao's Empress Han Jing and took this chance to backstab her. If Pang Nuan died in Xianyang City, Han Jing will be devastated.

Politics is dirty and complicated.

People fight openly and also secretly.

Among all the various schemes, no one will know the clear winner until the end.

Although this has no effect on Xiang Shaolong who knows the ending, personal fights and schemes are still unknown to him. For example, he still does not know if he will be killed by Lu Buwei.

Xiang Shaolong thought for a while and enquired: "Tian Dan wishes to see me; does Lord know the reason behind this?"

Lord Longyang was surprised: "Is that so? From my observations, Lu Buwei and Tian Dan must have a secret agreement. They are likely to follow the Eastern and Western Emperors example, with the allied states belonging to Qin and Yan belonging to Qi. Although they know that they are deceiving each other, there are advantages to both parties in the short term. Now, they are best buddies. I really have no idea why Tian Dan is looking for you."

Xiang Shaolong is sure that Lord Longyang is as puzzled as him. Ending their conversation, he sent him out of the Command Centre personally. Under the escort of the Eighteen Guardians, he went to see Tian Dan.

The guesthouse is heavily guarded.

Dan Chu welcomed him at the main door and has a serious expression on his face. He only exchanged some courtesy words.

When he brought him into Tian Dan's inner chamber, this Chancellor of Qi is playing a tune on the ancient qin instrument.

Like waves hitting endlessly upon the shore, the 'Male Immortal' piece he was playing filled the entire hall with music.

The Liu brothers who never left his side were staring at Xiang Shaolong menacingly.

Dan Chu retreated a few steps but did not leave the room.

Xiang Shaolong knew that this is inappropriate but no matter how daring Tian Dan is, he dared not assassinate him in Xianyang City.

But if Tian Dan has the support of Lu Buwei to kill him, the Eighteen Guardians and himself will perish in this guesthouse.

Tian Dan suddenly stopped playing and laughed: "How is Dong Horse Fanatic?"

He stood up and faced him, his eyes shining sharp like an eagle's eyes.

Xiang Shaolong knows that he cannot hide his identity for long but is certain

that Tian Dan is not fully confident of this truth. Thus, Tian Dan is trying to trick him with this sentence.

No matter how intimate Tian Dan is to Lu Buwei, Lu Buwei will not be so foolish to tell him this secret. After all, everything is planned by Lu Buwei, causing Tian Dan's scheme to fail, his army suffering losses and returning to Qi in disgrace.

He feigned surprise and replied: "I do not know what Chancellor Tian is talking about."

Tian Dan confidently walked over towards him. When he is pretty close, he challenged: "The earth-shattering Xiang Shaolong did not dare to admit his past actions? You may have deceived others but you can never deceive me!"

The corners of his mouth curled up in a devious smile and he gestured with his right hand, adding: "Let me show you something interesting."

Dan Chu reacted to his gesture and came between them. From his bosom, he retrieved a silk drawing and spread it open.

At the same time, the Liu Brothers came forward to Tian Dan's sides and strike a defensive posture in case there is an attack from Xiang Shaolong.

The atmosphere became very tense.

When Xiang Shaolong glanced at the drawing, his limbs turned cold and his whole body shook uncontrollably, as if he has fallen into a ice lake.

On the silk painting was someone who looks similar to Shan Rou, except for the eyes. The person in the painting has weak looking eyes unlike the determined eyes of Shan Rou.

Tian Dan coldly laughed: “Needless to say, Brother Xiang should know this lady. She came to assassinate me and was captured by me. I believe she was once the wife of Dong Horse Fanatic. Does Brother Xiang still want to deny?”

Xiang Shaolong is at a disadvantageous position and is feeling tremendously uncomfortable. Thinking that Shan Rou is in his hands, he has lost his bearings and cannot think properly.

Tian Dan plainly state: “It is only a woman and I can give her back to you anytime. As long as Brother Xiang can do something for me, this woman will return back into your arms.”

Xiang Shaolong was hit by realization and figured out the problem that bothering him.

His heart was filled with utmost grief.

He knew that Shan Rou has failed to assassinate Tian Dan and committed suicide. That is why the artist cannot paint her eyes with the determined look.

With his eyes glowing with hatred, he roared: “You need not speak further. If you, Tian Dan, can return back to Qi alive, I will write my name in inversely.”

As the four men were flabbergasted, Xiang Shaolong left with a pained expression.

Finally, he has a reason to kill Tian Dan.

End of Book 12